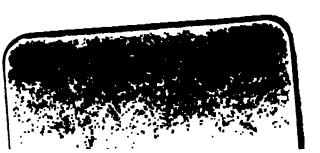

AFTER LONG GRIEF AND PAIN.

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By "RITA,"

AUTHOR OF "FAUSTINE," "MY LADY COQUETTE," "FRAGOLETTA," "A SINLESS SECRET," "COUNTESS DAPHNE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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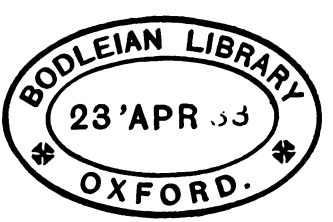

AFTER LONG GRIEF AND PAIN.

(*Continued.*)

AFTER LONG GRIEF AND PAIN.

CHAPTER XVII.

LESLIE'S absence was the first great sorrow I had ever had to bear.

His vows and promises of constancy were buried deep in my heart, were treasured and reverenced by me as something too sacred for other eyes to read, for other ears to hear. I had no thought of doubting their truth. My faith in his constancy was as firm as in my own. I knew that no earthly power could make me false, even by a thought, to him; and it seemed im-

possible that his love could be less steadfast, his passion less sincere than was mine.

He had promised to write regularly and often—"it was the one comfort left him," he had whispered tenderly as his last kisses lingered on my lips, as with dim and burning eyes he had searched my face, to read there for the last time the blushing assurance of my great, exceeding love.

Three months passed sadly and wearily enough, but he kept his word. His letters were frequent, tender, loving—my one consolation, my greatest, purest delight. What mattered Lady Ramsay's sneers and smiles while I had them—while the blessed assurance of his love was all my own?

But there came a day at last when the mail brought no letter from my darling. Another followed with the same result;

then, with sickening dread, I wrote and implored some reason for this strange silence. Was he ill — in trouble — in danger?

Two months more of dreary waiting, and still no answer. I could not understand it. I grew pale and wan with anxiety. The postman's knock was sufficient to throw me into a fever of anxiety, only succeeded by the anguish of disappointed hope.

I became ill, very ill at last, and Lady Ramsay insisted on my seeing a doctor, a fashionable doctor, who felt my pulse and said my system wanted tone, and ordered tonics and change of air as a remedy for a breaking heart.

To add to my troubles, my father was away from home, and, without consulting him on the subject, Lady Ramsay took me

away to Nice, and there we remained three months—she enjoying the whirl of society as usual, I lonely and solitary, asking only to be left alone, to be troubled by no sympathy, worried by no interest.

Glynne had entered the Army now, and I had not seen or heard from him for months. I began to think he too had forgotten me, to doubt whether men had any memory of women's foolish fondness! I dared not write to Leslie again. Pride forbade it. Three letters had gone to him —all were unanswered. What could I think save that he had forgotten me? What could I do save live on in the faint hope that when the three years of probation had expired he would give some sign—some token that might at least explain the mystery of his present conduct.

Gradually and slowly hope forsook me; for some cause, some reason of his own,

my lover's faith was broken, his love no longer mine; and in the sharp terrible pain of that awaking all my youth seemed to die out of me for ever; the world was no longer the same—no more a paradise of pure faiths and sweet beliefs and tender idyls. No, all was changed—changed as I was myself. In my pain and desperation I could think of nothing that had comfort; even religion failed in its consolations; every prayer had been so long for him, and of him, that my petitions now only opened my wounds afresh. Sometimes I almost grew mad with the shame and loathing of this treachery, this cruel guilt that could win and waste all the sweetness of a girl's young opening life for the passion of an idle moment—so I had come to call my darling's love. Heaven forgive me!

It was the first perception of wrong that had ever touched me; and its noxious

poison seemed to breathe itself into the very core and centre of my being, destroying my faith, my hopes, my dreams, by its hateful influence. I had been betrayed, insulted—so I told myself again and again. But, alas, the telling could not kill my love, even then!

We went home at last; and then, without warning or preparation, I found myself suddenly plunged into the vortex of fashionable life. Lady Ramsay would hear no excuse, take no denial. My health was restored; I was old enough to be introduced to the world, and I must take my position as my father's daughter, if only for his sake. I listened and obeyed. What mattered anything to me now? Let them do with me as they pleased—it was all one whether I was lonely in solitude or lonely in a crowd—I should never be the same again—never!

I neither complained nor objected, I simply acquiesced in all Lady Ramsay wished and said — too spiritless to object, too indifferent to care—and with such feelings as these I was launched on society.

Glynne came home for a brief visit, and noticed my pale face and spiritless manners; but, when I asked him if he had no news of Leslie, he only said carelessly—"Oh, no; I have not heard from him for months!"

This convinced me of my lover's faithlessness. He had, perhaps, made new friends. In any case he had forgotten old ones. There was nothing to do but to imitate his own example, and be faithless too.

Oh, if I only could win such feelings, if only by any act or deed or prayer, this great passionate absorbing love could be driven out of my heart for ever!

So I cried wildly and fiercely when my sufferings grew more than I could bear—

when the mask of indifference fell from my face, and in loneliness and in solitude I wept and moaned over my broken dream, as only women weep over their shattered idols.

I was often in society, had gaiety, excitement, amusement without end. I won admiration; but oh, how I loathed it! Men called me beautiful. Alas, how sickening a sound was their flattery! Only from one voice could such words have been sweet, only from one face was admiration acceptable.

Both my father and Lady Ramsay had concluded that I had long forgotten Leslie; from the time his letters ceased I never mentioned his name. Even Glynne seemed to shun my confidence, and had scarcely ever a leisure hour to spend with me. So I kept my sorrow to myself; I was too proud, too hurt, to let others see how deep it was.

Once in the *Gazette* I saw that Leslie had been raised to the rank of Major; that was two years after he had left England, but to all intents and purposes he was dead to me. I wondered sometimes that my father never alluded to his strange behaviour; but I was thankful he did not. I concluded that Lady Ramsay had persuaded him to ignore the subject altogether, to treat it as a schoolgirl episode, not worthy of serious consideration.

The more I mingled with the world, the more I saw of the follies and perfidies around me, the surer I felt of Leslie's faithlessness. His love had not been worth the name. He had forgotten me as lightly, as easily as though I had been nothing to him; and yet, I could not forget him! No, though I prayed to do it, and strove to do it! My efforts were all in vain. Amidst the turmoil of what the world

calls "pleasure" my heart ached for him, and called and craved for his presence. In the quiet of country life, when the season was over, I found neither rest nor peace.

I never felt the dreamy softness of the summer air, the odorous breath of a summer night, without a shudder for the memories they brought, the scenes they recalled. I never watched the restless sea, or the sunset's track across the width of waters, but I seemed to see again the lover of my girlish days, the wistful, passionate eyes glowing with a love I had thought eternal, the grave broad brow, the whole beautiful kindly face whose like I should never again behold. And as I thought of all I had dreamt, with such perfect dreams as only love can teach, it seemed as if my heart would

break with the greatness of its own agony.

Wherever I was—by night, by day—that one face always haunted me. In the summer's golden noons, in the cool misty mornings, in the dusky autumn nights, with the dark leafy shadows through which the moonlight fell, I saw it still; earnest, loving, true, as when my eyes had gazed upon it, as when my lips had vainly tried to shape the one word that held such a world of sorrow in its utterance—"Farewell!"

It looked so true still; and yet, how false it was! Oh, if I only could forget, I said to myself! If I only could bring pride to the rescue and crush all the memory of my faithless lover from my heart! Had he not insulted and deceived me? Was I so poor and mean a thing?

Was my love of so little account in his eyes that he could not keep faith with me for one brief year of absence?

I was a child no longer. Could not womanly dignity, womanly shame, chill and cool this fever-flame within my veins? Of the sin and treachery of the world I had learned so much now, of the little account in which men hold a woman's constancy—a girl's pure trusting faith.

And yet my love had been so perfect and so true a thing—it lived on despite all efforts to conquer and subdue it. I had dreamed such perfect dreams; I had thanked Heaven in the fulness of my deep content for the blessing that had crowned my life, for a love I had thought to hear and to see, and to feel for ever and for ever, yet never feel or

see, or hear of it enough. And now? It had faded from my sight; it had perished in my grasp; it would sound in my ears again—never, never more!

CHAPTER XVIII.

I WAS among the wild heights and heathery moors of the north. I saw the sun rise over the grand old hills, and gleam through the broad screen of foliage, all russet-hued and golden-tinted, for Autumn's hand was painting out the hues of summer once again. The free air of heaven blew over the wide-stretching moors; there were sweet scents, and fragrant odours around me; but amidst all the beauty I saw, and the freedom I had gained, I was perfectly and intensely wretched.

I was changed — utterly changed, and

could no longer look upon life with the unreasoning unreflecting delight that the mere sense of existence once brought to me. No, those days were over for ever, those glad sweet hours were past; and when the sun shone upon the brown hills, and the crimson and gold of the leaves proclaimed that summer was fading from earth once more, I wondered if indeed it were only two years since my darling's arms were round me, and his farewell kisses breathing on my lips.

A great darkness fell over me as I thought of it. Out of my life the summer had faded too; the winter chilled me as it drew near in its stead.

My father's shooting-box in the Highlands was full of visitors. A large party of fashionable acquaintances had come down with us from London, and Glynne and

Fred had brought some of the officers from their respective regiments to aid in the sport.

The male portion of our visitors of course were away all day. Sometimes the ladies drove out to meet them, duly provided with luncheon baskets and hampers of sparkling wine, bottled ale, and other delectable drinks. These *al-fresco* picnics were in great favour with the fair sex, and gave rise to many incipient flirtations between the officers and themselves. I joined in them sometimes; not because I had any care or interest in the matter, but simply for some distraction to the one painful memory that never left me; the torture which I had to bear through all the weary hours that passed so slowly now.

I listened to whispered words of admiration, of flattery, of love sometimes, and then I recoiled with loathing from the sound. I

hated myself for encouraging, even by a look or word, the old sweet story I never could hear again, as I had heard it—once. I hated those who tried to speak it to my unwilling ears. There was no music in it now; it had died out of the word for ever; it only tortured me with the vanished sweetness of a memory that would not die out of my heart, and I hated all others who dared to woo me with like words, and lay down their love before my thankless fealty to the past.

But there was one among the crowd of flatterers who surrounded me who alone seemed impervious to coldness and disdain, who would not be discouraged by *hauteur*, or chilled by indifference. He was a friend of Glynne's, a particular friend I might say, and I had met him often in London. His name was Sir Arthur Sydney; he was a man of about

thirty years of age (I do not think anyone could call him a *gentleman* with any degree of truth), and report proclaimed him a millionnaire.

How his father made the money which the son lavished so freely, no one seemed quite to know; but after all, what mattered that? For all Sir Arthur's recklessness, dissipated habits, and vulgar, overbearing manners, there was not a mother in Belgravia who would have denied him her daughter's hand in consideration of the fifteen thousand a year, which was the purchase-money for it. If his physical attractions were not great, they were counterbalanced by more weighty ones; besides his fifteen thousand per annum, he had thirty thousand more in prospect on the death of his mother, a house in Park Lane, and a hunting seat in the shires.

He was considered a most eligible *parti*, and he boasted sometimes to me of the "dead set" made at him by anxious mothers and matrimonially disposed daughters. He was possessed of imperturbable effrontery and conceit.

He seated himself on the pedestal of his own wealth and self-importance, and looked down upon society in general from that lofty height with the arrogance of a low, coarse mind. To say I disliked him is a mild form of expressing my detestation and repugnance, and yet this man was Glynne's chosen friend. Nay, more; he bestowed upon me an amount of attention and devotion which drew down upon my unlucky head all the sneers of envy and jealousy from the "mammas" whose daughters had not been fortunate enough to attract the notice of this modern Orson. Society could afford to ignore his vulgarity;

it was well gilded. Society flattered his self-importance, and called his coarseness "so eccentric"; but then society is given to do this in the golden age in which we live.

CHAPTER XIX.

I HAD been in Scotland a month, and the rest and change, after the fatigues of a London season, had been very beneficial to me. My pale cheeks had regained their colour; my frame was less weary, my step more buoyant and elastic. Yes, health and strength had come back, little as I cared for them, little as I heeded them. Everyone remarked on the improvement in my looks, and Glynne — who of late had resumed his old caressing ways, his frank, gay speeches, and boyish teasings —also told me of it, and joked about my

conquests and flirtations, as he called them, in the old merry way.

My brother's love was the one thing which gladdened my heart now, the only consolation I had found since that strange, cruel time when my lover's faithlessness first dawned upon me. To Glynne my heart turned, and from him alone I learned a little forgetfulness—a brief peace.

If only he had been less intimate with Sir Arthur Sydney!

What attraction could he find in the society of that vulgar, illiterate man? But whenever I spoke of it he seemed ill at ease and uncomfortable, and changed the subject quickly.

Was there anything between them? I sometimes wondered. Surely friendship, real sincere friendship, could not exist between two such opposite minds, such dissimilar natures, without a deeper motive

than appeared here? Sometimes I thought Glynne was afraid of him. Fearless and bold as he was to everyone else, in Sir Arthur's presence I noticed he seemed quiet and constrained; less talkative and more gloomy.

Once, at some chance expression of Sir Arthur's about money, I saw that he turned deadly pale, and a moment after he left the room.

That night I observed, for the first time, that my brother drank more wine than was good for him; and, as I sat alone in my room, I heard him pass, long after midnight, with Sir Arthur. Their voices were loud and noisy. I thought they were quarrelling, but the next day they were just as friendly as ever. But still I could not rid myself of the idea that this friendship boded no good for Glynne. I wished—oh, how

I wished!—that Sir Arthur's visit was over.

One morning, at breakfast, Sir Arthur's attentions were more than usually obtrusive. Oh, how I disliked that man! And yet, for Glynne's sake I tried to be civil to him. Only the evening before my brother had implored me to be so. He hinted that he was under great obligations to him, and begged me, for the sake of the past, to try to treat him in a more friendly manner.

The past! Oh Glynne, did you wish to make my task harder that you should have appealed to me by that memory?

The next day was a miserable day to me—miserable from its associations. It was two years that day since Leslie left England—eighteen months since his last letter had reached me. It was before me now—tender, earnest, loving; no word of changed feelings, of failing love. Oh, what

could his silence mean? Could he really have forgotten me? Sometimes I thought I would write again—just once more. And yet of what use? I could not forfeit my womanly dignity entirely. I could not force myself upon an unwilling suitor. Oh, no! Better remain forgotten than that. I had endured humiliation enough; I could bear no more.

One evening Lady Ramsay sent a message saying that she wished me to go to her in her boudoir. A request so unusual surprised and disquieted me. What could she wish to see me about? Our affection for each other had not increased during the last two years, and confidential communications were altogether unknown.

If I had been surprised at my stepmother's request, I was still more amazed at the communication she had summoned

me to receive. I found her seated in her dressing-room in solitary state, and with an expression of triumph and elation on her face that roused my curiosity. She asked me to be seated, and I chose a low easy-chair near the fire, for the autumn evenings were chilly, and she always had fires lighted in all the rooms at night.

After a few preliminary observations she came to the real purport of her summons.

"Rita," she said, "I wish to speak to you seriously about your future. It is nearly two years since you first came out, and you are to all intents and purposes not settled yet. Now I know you have refused two or three good offers, and, though I was annoyed at your folly, I yet made no remarks on it. However, I think it my duty now to call your attention to these matters. It is high time you were married and settled."

"Indeed?" I replied coldly. "Perhaps you will allow me to consult my own inclinations on that point. I have no wish to change my present condition, and the offers you speak of were none of them agreeable or welcome to me."

"So I supposed," she said sneeringly. "But for all that you must consult other inclinations besides your own. You don't wish to be an old maid, I suppose, and it is a duty —a positive duty for girls to marry when they can. Now, you are not very pretty, and you have such a cold, proud way with you—enough to chill any man—that I am surprised you get any attention at all."

"So am I," I interpolated.

"Men don't like stiff, serious girls," continued Lady Ramsay. "They want to be amused, entertained, made much of. I have been in despair about you since you came out; you make the office of chaperon

a most ungrateful one. And really you ought to make a good match; there is no reason why you shouldn't."

"Only the reason that I don't wish to marry at all," I observed indifferently.

"Ah, that is just what I wish to speak about! It is a silly remark; but no matter. I suppose you have noticed there is someone here very attentive to you. You ought to take it as a great compliment, for really he might pick and choose where he likes, and all the women have been after him for ever so long. Do you know whom I mean?"

"Sir Arthur Sydney, I suppose," I answered, colouring.

"Yes; you are aware of his admiration then? Well, you know how rich he is, too. Certainly his father was only a manufacturer or ironfounder, or something; but that's no matter. He's been made a

baronet, and is received everywhere. You meet him at the best houses. Why he should have taken a fancy to you, I can't imagine. But he has. In fact he has proposed for you, and your father is delighted. Now, I promised to speak to you to-night, as I know he won't wait long before getting your answer."

"My answer?" I looked up a little bewildered; I had not been following my stepmother's words very closely.

"You will have little doubt about it, I imagine," she went on rapidly. "Such an offer doesn't fall to a girl's lot every day. I am amazed at your good fortune myself. Still I am very pleased, naturally."

"Oh, my answer will be short enough," I said carelessly. "I hate the man! I would as soon think of marrying — a — a toad?"

"Really you are too ridiculous!" ex-

claimed Lady Ramsay impatiently. "You don't mean to say you would be such an idiot as to refuse him?"

A hot flush scorched my cheek — my hands trembled as they lay clasped together on my lap.

"I do not intend to marry anyone," I said.

"You are not a child, but you certainly talk like one. Not marry! What absolute nonsense! Every girl says that once at least in her life, but doesn't she regret it if her words come to pass? You must marry, and you will never get a better offer. I shall accept it for you if you talk any wild nonsense about refusing."

"I imagine you have scarcely the right or the power to do that," I answered, all my spirit rising in hot indignation at her words. "I am not a piece of furniture to be barganied for, I suppose; and, what-

ever you may wish, papa would never force me into an unwelcome marriage."

She grew very pale, and all the old dislike flashed into her eyes as for a moment they met mine.

"I suppose you are still treasuring the image of your gallant captain in your heart," she sneered. "That accounts for your obduracy."

"Sir Arthur is no gentleman," I said coldly, "or he would never have pressed his attentions on me when he knew they were distasteful."

"Oh, as to that, my dear"—and Lady Ramsay shrugged her shoulders—"people's ideas of 'gentlemen' differ! Yours is that of a fast, reckless man, who has had love affairs without end, who picks up a child at the seaside and flirts with her *pour passer le temps*, and, because he has a handsome face and a pair of blue eyes

she swears him eternal fidelity; he meanwhile going off to 'fresh woods and pastures new,' and completely ignoring her very existence after a few months' absence. Had you the vanity to think you could keep a man like Leslie Macgregor true—a fast, reckless fellow whose means are as poor as his character? Of course he only amused himself with you; I was sure of it all along. As for that farce of an engagement——"

"I do not wish to discuss Captain Macgregor's conduct now," I interrupted. "It concerns no one but myself. It is strange and mysterious enough to admit of explanation. Perhaps one day I may be enlightened as to its meaning."

She turned suddenly very pale.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "You surely would not be so mad, so unwomanly, Rita, as to exchange even a

word or look with that man again, after the disgraceful manner in which he has behaved!"

"I don't know what I might not be mad enough to do, if I saw him," I cried recklessly. "Heaven grant I never may!"

"Rita," said Lady Ramsay, "when a girl loves so wildly and unreasonably as you do, there is but one safeguard for her—marriage. Take my advice, and give up wearing the willow. Life is too short to waste in sentimental nonsense. A man is but a man, however much you may idealize him into a hero; his chivalry is never virtuous; his faith never sure; his honour never spotless, believe what you may. Sooner or later in life, all women learn this. Perhaps it is best to learn it early, as you have done. Now what possible objection can you have to marrying Sir Arthur Sydney? His position is good;

he is a kind-hearted man, though a little *brusque* and eccentric. You will have every luxury, every comfort the heart of woman can desire. I can't see why you should object to him."

"Can't you?" I said bitterly—"after all I have told you? He is a coarse, vulgar man. We have not an idea or taste in common. His manners and habits are alike obnoxious to me, and—in short, I detest him."

"Do you?" she said coolly. "My dear child, hundreds of girls have said that of the men they marry, and yet contrived to live with them very comfortably. How foolish to detest fifteen thousand a year, and thirty thousand more in prospect! Why, half the girls introduced this season would have been wild with delight at having such a chance as you have offered to you now. Now do try to take a sensible view of the

matter, Rita; you have seen what folly love is. Try what power money possesses. Believe me, it is the only real good in life; it gives us all we desire; it purchases us all we wish."

"Not love, or peace, or happiness," I answered sadly. "It seems to me that no life need be coveted that is barren of those elements of content."

"Nonsense!" cried Lady Ramsay sharply. "Who heeds such trifles nowadays when the question of marriage arises? Love is a pastime for idle moments; it should never be allowed to stand in the way of life's deeper interests. As for peace and happiness, if money can't bring them I wonder what can? Do you suppose that any of the women you meet, or have met in society, ever married or intend to marry for love? They may have had *affaires de cœur* at some period or other, but they

never sacrifice position or wealth for such fancies. The world would soon be turned upside down if they did. The best marriages are those where the position and fortune of both parties are suitable. Who would ever think of acting against all dictates of common sense, or spoiling an eligible match because, forsooth, 'they do not love each other'? Why, it is ridiculous!"

"Is it?" I said wearily, not lifting my eyes to her face, but gazing straight before me at the fire. "Yes, I suppose it is—to you."

"And to everyone else with two grains of common sense in their heads," she retorted sharply. "Really, Rita, you quite provoke me with your folly. If I thought there was the slightest chance of your ever marrying the man you fell in love with in your wild, romantic fashion, I would not counsel you to accept this

offer. But I know perfectly well there is no such chance; neither would he ever have made you happy. He is the last man in the world to settle down and become a good husband. I have told you already, that he was one of the fastest men in the fastest set in London. I am only surprised how a quiet, well-principled girl like yourself could care for him, much less make yourself so ridiculous as you are doing by refusing every other offer, and moping and pining away till you draw everyone's attention to your strange conduct. If you are a sensible girl, Rita, take my advice and marry Sir Arthur Sydney. Not immediately, of course; but in any case agree to an engagement, and you will be much happier than you are now, while you allow your thoughts to dwell so persistently on that unworthy man who

has jilted you so shamefully. Do believe, my dear, that I am only advising you for the best, in saying all this."

She bent forward and kissed my forehead softly. Judas kisses! Treacherous falsehoods! Ah, how I anathematised my folly afterwards for letting myself believe in them even for a moment!

I answered her at length, slowly and sadly:

"I will try to believe you are right in your advice, Lady Ramsay. You know the world. I — I only know my own heart, and its counsels do not agree with yours."

Then I left her hurriedly, and went back to the solitude of my own room.

My whole nature revolted from the thought of the marriage, or rather barter, she wished. My wounded, aching heart called out in passionate dread at the bare

thought of it; but, as I remembered all she had told me of Leslie, I felt so deeply humiliated that I almost resolved to listen to the voice of pride, and avenge myself on his faithlessness.

I had been forgotten so easily, and my fidelity was only making me an object of ridicule and contempt in the eyes of others. Oh, why could I not cast all memory of him from my heart and prove that I had conquered my girlhood's weakness! Lady Ramsay's advice was worldly, certainly, but still it was sensible in some respects, and it appealed to the pride which was inherent in my nature, which was so strong—till love conquered it.

Ah, women are women's worst foes! They know every weak point of their adversaries' armour so well. They know where to aim the shafts of ridicule and mockery so perfectly.

The first thing that ever shook my faith in my darling was a woman's words; the first thing that made me false to the higher instincts of my nature, a woman's treacherous counsel. For I had not ceased to love Leslie even yet, and—I could not forget him.

Does a woman ever forget the man who first won her heart to his keeping; the kisses that have burned on her lips; the words that were eloquent with passion? Does she ever forget when she has once loved, no matter whether the love were wise or foolish, good or great?

She may grow light enough to lend herself to other follies, to seek oblivion in other joys; but ever and again some pang of remorse will waken in her heart, will bring back such memories as these, while yet one spark of true or tender womanhood remains.

I had not forgotten anything—not a word, not a look or caress that Leslie had ever given me. My heart burned still with the same love even in the weariness of its own complaining.

I went to the window and gazed sadly out at the moonlit peace of the outer world. Ah, if only some such peace could have been mine; could have stilled the fever-pulses throbbing so wildly; could have calmed the ache of heart and brain that was now so often with me!

I thought of all the sorrow my love had brought. I seemed to lose all sense of time and place, and once more I went back to that day when Leslie's vows of truth were lingering in my ears with the sweet rich music of a love he called undying then.

I forgot all else as I thought of it. I lost all memory of his faithlessness. I

only saw the brave honest eyes, the handsome kindly face, the like of which I had never seen again. With half-blind eyes I gazed at it, and once more I seemed to hear my darling's voice speaking to me, as one in a dream hears voices long silent, sees faces long dead. It was but two years ago since I had heard it, and yet it seemed so many ages!

It seemed to me that constancy weighed upon me like a curse, pressing out all joy, all peace from my heart. I thought so to-night when I remembered how others loved me, how others wooed me; and yet I could not listen to their love-words without that torture of memory that was worse than death. I felt bitter, wrathful, reckless; and yet my despair could not deaden, or stamp out my love for Leslie. Though it had met with a return so base, I could not bring myself to take a like

revenge on his perfidy; to give to another the lips he had kissed; to vow to another the love he had won. Was I foolish, mad, childish, in this one belief that clung to me? Heaven knows! I could not help it!

I heard the hours strike, and the long, wakeful night passed slowly on; yet I sat there still, alone with my sorrow, longing, as I pray I may never long again, for the peace I had lost, the love that had faded out of my life—for ever.

What beauty did the rosy daybreak bring as I watched the sun rising over the distant hills? What fragrance did the morning breathe? I only saw the sun through blinding tears. I only watched the dawn with passionless despair. Around me was but the desolation of silence, for love had left me!

CHAPTER XX.

I WENT down to breakfast wondering how Sir Arthur would greet me, and resolved, in spite of Lady Ramsay's advice the night before, that I would ask my father to decline his proposal.

It was late when I entered the breakfast-room, so late that I expected to find most of the sportsmen gone for the day. In this, however, I was disappointed. Nearly all the gentlemen were there, and, from the fragments of conversation I heard as I passed up the room, I fancied they were

busily planning some project for the day's amusements. Lady Ramsay beckoned me to a seat beside her, which I took; and, on glancing round, was excessively annoyed at finding Sir Arthur beside me. I gave him my usual indifferent greeting, and then busied myself with a pretence of breakfast.

"Do you know what we are going to do to-day, Miss Ramsay?" he asked presently.

"No. Shooting as usual, I suppose," I replied carelessly.

"Indeed, no. We are going to devote ourselves to the ladies," he said, with an affected smile. "We are all going to have a grand picnic. We shall drive or ride to Glen Fernach, and dine there, and return home in the evening, when we are to have a dance, Lady Ramsay informs us. You know the place, I suppose? It is said

to be the finest bit of scenery about here."

"Oh yes, I know it!" I answered. "But it is a very long way for a picnic."

"That depends on how the parties are arranged," he said, with a meaning smile. "I know someone with whom the longest ride would be only too short. I suppose you mean to go on horseback, Miss Ramsay?"

"I don't know," I answered shortly; "I would much rather not go at all. I detest picnics."

"Not go!" he exclaimed. "Lady Ramsay, I must appeal to you. Here is your daughter threatening to deprive us of her presence to-day. Pray don't permit it."

"I think you must be mistaken, Sir Arthur," said my stepmother coldly. "I hope Rita sufficiently understands her duty

as the daughter of the house to treat our guests with some consideration."

"I'll drive you, Rita, if you like," here interrupted Glynne, who was sitting near Lady Ramsay. "Perhaps you don't care for riding?"

"No, I do not," I said emphatically. "Very well, Glynne, I will go with you."

A swift glance of anger shot from Lady Ramsay's eyes; but she made no remark upon my decision, nor did Sir Arthur. However, after breakfast, I perceived them both in deep conversation, and I began to wonder what they were planning.

"No matter, though," I said to myself as I passed on to my own room. "I am my own mistress still. I am not going to be forced into any marriage. I shall refuse Sir Arthur, as I have done the others."

In the corridor outside my room I found

Glynne lingering. He came hurriedly up to me as I approached.

"Rita," he said quickly, "about the drive; you don't mind Sydney going with us, do you? I have promised him a seat."

"Mind!" I exclaimed angrily. "Of course I do. Oh Glynne, could you not have come with me alone for once? You know how I hate that man!"

"I am sorry I promised," he said, in a strange hesitating manner altogether unlike his own. "But it can't be helped now, dear; and, Rita, do be civil to him."

"Oh Glynne," I said wearily, "what is the secret of your friendship with this man? I cannot understand it."

"Hush," he returned nervously, as he glanced round to see if we were alone. "There is nothing—nothing, Rita. Only he is a good-natured fellow, and he has

been very kind to me once or twice, when I have been in a corner. I don't want to offend him, and I think, dear, he is awfully fond of you."

"Much I care for that," I said scornfully and indignantly. "I wish he felt for me as I do for him." Then I passed on into my own room, to prepare for the drive.

What a miserable drive it was! We had a small, open carriage, and Glynne drove. Sir Arthur was unusually lively and talkative, and his manner was even more offensive to me on that account. It was no use to appear indifferent, to answer in monosyllables. He ignored coolness and laughed at rebuff. There was nothing for it, I plainly saw, but to let him have his own way till I could refuse him point-blank.

"If he were the richest man in Europe," I said to myself, as I looked at his coarse

flushed face and awkward figure, "I would not marry him, even to escape beggary."

Did I think then that I might marry him to escape something worse; to avert a shame more terrible? No—oh, thank Heaven, no!—not then!

The picnic was pronounced a great success. The day was perfect. The sky without cloud; the air soft and fragrant as a remembrance of summer; and the spot was so lovely, the scenery so grand, that even the beauty-sated eyes of men and women who had "done" all the wonders of Italy, Germany, and Switzerland could not withhold their admiration and delight.

As for me, I was beyond all enjoyment. My head ached and throbbed with the heat and the want of sleep the previous night. I felt languid and oppressed, and [redacted]versation seemed an effort.

I only longed for the day to be over, for a little solitude, a little peace.

It was late in the afternoon when I at last managed to escape from the noise and babble of tongues, the constant claims on my attention. I wandered off by myself, and, in a little shady nook which seemed to defy detection, I sat quietly down at the foot of a large beech-tree for a rest after my exertions.

All was very still. The sunlight flickered through the screen of leaves; the shadows played at hide-and-seek among the branches.

With a deep sigh of relief I congratulated myself on my happy discovery.

Alas, my satisfaction was not destined to last long! A footstep sounded close behind me, and a moment later a figure stood between me and the slanting sun-rays I was watching. The very man I had been

so anxious to avoid had traced me to my solitude, and, with an angry flush upon my face, I met the bold, insolent gaze and triumphant smile of Sir Arthur Sydney.

"So glad to have found you at last," he said eagerly. "I couldn't for the life of me imagine where you had hidden yourself. No, pray don't get up; I'll sit down too. I want to have a quiet talk with you, and this is just the spot for it. Quite a lovers' retreat, eh?"—and he looked at me again with that odious smile, that insolent triumph.

I drew haughtily away, as he seated himself beside me; but he did not appear to notice the gesture of disdain.

"Can you guess what I want to talk about?" he asked coolly, as he glanced at my averted face.

"No!" I answered sharply. "I am

quite at a loss to imagine a sufficient reason for your disturbing my solitude."

"You don't surely prefer sitting alone to being the what-d'-you-call-'em of 'admiring eyes,' do you?" he asked.

"I should advise you to provide yourself with a dictionary when you wish to be particularly intelligible," I said coldly.

He laughed, in no way disconcerted.

"Oh, I'm a plain man and don't understand fine speeches," he replied. "That's why I can't get on with you, I suppose; but, Miss Ramsay, you must know, you must see that—that I admire you very much. In fact, to be plain and honest in the matter, I must tell you that of all the girls I have ever seen you are the only one I should care to marry. What do you say about it? Will you have me?"

I could scarcely repress a smile at this brusque mode of wooing.

"Not much sentiment here," I said to myself. "No fear of wounding this man's heart by a refusal." I turned gravely towards him. "Sir Arthur," I said quickly, "you do me a great honour by your proposal. It is quite impossible for me to accept it, however."

"What!" he gasped, springing suddenly to his feet, his face growing perfectly purple. "You don't—you can't mean it!"

"I do mean it," I said haughtily, as I rose also from my seat on the mossy roots of the beech-tree, and faced him. "I am sorry if I hurt your feelings in any way, but I have given you a plain answer to a plain question."

"But you are joking," he rejoined; "you don't really mean it, Rita. Do you know how fond I am of you? Do

you think, because I don't make fine speeches and use grand words like some of your popinjay friends yonder, that I have no heart—that I don't love you? Indeed, you are wrong. I love you as I never thought it was in me to love any woman; and now I have set my heart upon winning you, and I mean to do it."

A strange thrill of fear ran through my heart at those low-spoken, determined words. I looked up at him, and saw how white his face had become, how fierce and cruel a light shone in his eyes.

"I do not think those are quite the right words to use to a lady," I said, trying to speak calmly. "And, Sir Arthur, no determination of yours can affect my feelings. I have said, I will *not* marry you; let that suffice."

"Stop," he said suddenly, as I tried to move away. "Hear me out—hear me once more. You know I love you—love you in spite of your cold looks and haughty airs. Well, I tell you I am not a man to be balked of my wishes lightly or easily. If you do not care for me, I care for you—ay, and care for you enough to swear no other man shall win you, if I cannot."

"How dare you say such words to me!" I cried, with passionate indignation. "Is it because I am alone, and unprotected? Once more, Sir Arthur, let me pass. You have had my answer, do not think your threats will terrify me into altering it."

"Yes—you shall pass," he said, with the same malicious triumph gleaming in his eyes. "You shall pass in another moment. Listen;" and he drew nearer,

and whispered in my ear. "You can have your choice. Marry me, as I have asked you, or I will proclaim Glynne, your brother, to the world as—a forger!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"I WILL proclaim Glynne, your brother, to the world as a forger!"

The words were hissed in my ear as Sir Arthur came close to me; and, as I turned and faced him in the horror and disbelief of the moment, his face looked terrible in its revengeful passion.

"What!" I gasped—bewildered by his words—"Glynne a forger! a—oh, Heaven! I cannot believe it!"

No other words came to me then. Dazed with their horrible meaning, I trembled from head to foot, and was

obliged to lean against the tree beside me for support.

"It is true," he said moodily, his fierce tone curbed and restrained, as he saw the effect of his words. "It is quite true. Ask him if you doubt me. He will not dare deny it—even to you."

Deny it to me? To me, who loved him so; who worshipped him as the very soul of honour and of truth. The words cut me to the heart like a sharp sword. I tried to falter out some question, to demand some proof, but the words died on my parched lips, fear choked their utterance. Was this the secret of Glynne's friendship with Sir Arthur? Was this the mystery I had so longed to solve?

"I am afraid I have startled you," said the voice of my companion, in a far more subdued key than I had heard hitherto.

"Don't look like that, for Heaven's sake!" he continued in real alarm. "Are you going to faint?"

With a strong effort I commanded myself, and forced my lips to speak, though my voice had a far-away, unfamiliar sound that startled me when I heard it.

"I am not going to faint. Tell me what he has done. I can bear it now," I said slowly, and with an effort that was painful and laboured as the words.

"Done?"—and the old vicious light shone in Sir Arthur's eyes as I met them. "Done, Miss Ramsay! I will soon tell you that. He has forged my name for three hundred pounds!"

Slowly and painfully my heart beat, a dull rushing sound was in my ears. Could it be true?

"Oh Glynne, Glynne!" I murmured

faintly, in my dread and fear. "It can't —it can't be true?"

"True enough," said Sir Arthur gloomily. "I will tell you how it happened. Your brother has been in the habit of playing for higher stakes than he can well afford, and many a time I have cautioned him about it. Well, about a month before we came here, we were at a card-party together, and he lost heavily; something to the tune of one hundred pounds at one sitting. He was awfully down about it—threatened to cut, and I don't know what. I went home with him, and he was terribly excited, and drank a great deal. I tried in vain to pacify him. At last I told him I'd let him have a cheque for the hundred pounds, and he could pay me when he pleased. He muttered something about its only being a drop in the bucket, but at last accepted the offer. I wrote the

cheque in his own rooms, and left him. I got it back to-day with my banker's book. Look at it for yourself, Rita, and then see what the young villain has done!"

He opened a russia-leather pocket-book as he spoke, and took from it a folded piece of paper, which he handed me. I stretched out my hand for it, and he placed it, open, within it. The next instant I was gazing with blank tearless eyes at the evidence of Glynne's lasting dishonour.

The cheque was not for one hundred pounds, it was for four hundred pounds, and the words four hundred had been written in by a different hand from that which had signed it — and the one changed to a four. This was what I saw; this was the cruel knowledge which burned its meaning into my brain,

and made me well-nigh mad with the horror and loathing of the discovery. Glynne was in this man's power. In his power! Great Heaven, and I knew how merciless he was!

As I thought this, the lines and figures swam before my eyes in a blurred, confused mass, only to stand out once more, clear and distinct as letters of flame. £400—£400. It rang in my ears—it lived in every line of that little innocent-looking paper. It was not the sum of which I thought; it was the act; the shameful dishonourable act. And Glynne had done it! Glynne was a forger!

A deadly faintness crept over my bewildered brain. The blindness and dizziness of a great darkness swept over me, and the whole bright earth seemed suddenly obscured. Then I sank slowly down at

the foot of the tree and groaned aloud in my agony and shame.

"Oh, Glynne, Glynne!" I murmured brokenly. "How could you do it?"

I did not attempt to look at my companion. I had almost forgotten his presence. I crouched there in the abasement of this knowledge—speechless—tearless in my misery. The sun shone still in the wide blue heavens, and the birds sang on in the boughs above my head, but I—I was like one stunned and death-stricken with the shock of a great woe.

Oh, my brother—my brother. Was it for this I saw you snatched from the foaming waters of the angry sea? Was it for this I wept and prayed for your life and safety, so much dearer than my own? I moaned out some wild prayer to the man who stood there

silently watching me—the man who held Glynne in his power.

"Oh, Sir Arthur, spare him—don't be hard upon him! He could not have known what he did!"

"I daresay not," said my companion grimly; "that's a very common excuse, Miss Rita; only don't you see, the law is not over-fond of accepting it."

"The law! Oh, Sir Arthur," I cried wildly and impulsively, as I raised my terrified face at last, "you do not mean —you cannot mean—that!"

He looked quietly and meaningly at me, and answered very slowly:

"No, I do not mean it. I will spare him—for your sake."

At first I did not take in the full sense of his words. The shock of this discovery had completely obliterated the memory of

what had preceded it. But as I looked at him I read his meaning in his eyes, and my heart sank like lead in my breast, and a dull sickening despair crushed it, as I rose slowly to my feet and stood before him.

"You are right," I said quietly. "Let my brother's shame be mine. No price is too great to buy his secret."

"Listen to me!" he said uneasily, as he laid his hand on my arm. "You are the only woman I have ever loved. I am a rough, coarse fellow, I know, and you are a dainty, tender little flower, scarce fit for me to gather, I daresay you think. But for all that I believe I could make you happy, if you'll let me try. If you had only spoken more kindly when I asked you to marry me, and not in that cold proud way of yours which always maddens me, I would never have

told you this about Glynne. But, as I said before, I have made up my mind to win you, and I never go from my purpose. I don't know why I care for you so madly, but I do. Perhaps just because you were always so cool and tantalising, and never seemed to care two straws what I thought of you. All the other women I have met had such a tender regard for me—or my money—that it was quite refreshing to come across someone who never seemed to give it a thought. Oh, Rita, say you will be mine—really mine!"

I laughed—an odd little hysterical laugh. The last hour seemed to have changed me entirely. It seemed as if I were no longer the same girl who had wandered idly and carelessly to the shade of this lonely wood, but stood quite apart looking on at her, wondering a little why her life was so troubled and so sad a thing. A

moment and I turned to Sir Arthur again. I wonder what he read in my eyes. Surely something sadder than any words, for hope had rung its death-knell in my heart—then.

"Yes," I said calmly. "I will be your—wife."

His face changed utterly. He broke forth into rapturous words and excited speech. I listened like a creature in a dream, and in my heart I cried over and over again:

"Oh, Leslie, Heaven forgive me if I am false to you—at last!"

Surely no woman ever felt such loathing and horror as I felt then; and yet I bore it. I listened in dumb, mute despair, for I felt my doom was sealed. Sir Arthur had gained what he wanted; he asked no more. He wanted me—me, loathing, loveless, as I was. And he

might have me. I cut short his raptures at last, for I felt my self-command was failing.

"Sir Arthur," I said faintly, "will you leave me now—please? I want—to be alone."

Reluctantly he obeyed and turned away. Then, as if struck by some sudden thought he approached me again. He put his arm round me, and a shudder ran through me. I shut my eyes with the sickening horror of that embrace. He bent over me, and his lips rested on my brow—not on my lips, thank Heaven!—those lips that were sealed with my darling's kisses in our bygone days of love.

I wonder I did not die then, for truly no words can paint the horror of that moment. Then he left me.

I was alone at last! Down, down, on the cold leaf-strewn earth, I sank; while

passionate, despairing thoughts surged madly through my brain, and my heart throbbed loud and swift with the dizzy whirling pulsations of its new agony.

"Oh, merciful Heaven," I cried; "let me die now—let me die now! I have lost love! I have lost faith! Has life another thing for which to live."

CHAPTER XXII.

I DO not know how long I lay in the shade of that little wood fighting with my grief and passionate despair. I seemed blind and deaf to every sight and sound save the shame which burnt in my heart — for Glynne's dishonour. It was so terrible a thing to me to think of his disgraceful act; and yet the more I thought of it the less I could understand it.

A voice startled me at last, as I lay there with my face buried in my hands, and I looked up hastily to see Glynne himself beside me.

"Rita! Good Heaven, child, what is the matter?"

He looked absolutely frightened, as I lifted my colourless face and swollen eyes to meet his gaze. I made no answer. I only rose slowly and wearily, and sat down on the mossy roots of the great beech-tree beneath which I had thrown myself.

"Rita!" he exclaimed, coming closer to me and bending down to see my face. "For pity's sake, speak! Are you ill?"

"Ill," I said wearily, as I looked up into his terrified eyes. "No — oh, no; I am not—ill!"

"Then what is the matter? Why do I find you like this?"

"The matter," I moaned, as the bitterness and shame of my heart came once more before me. "Can you not guess, Glynne?"

The colour faded from his face. His very lips grew white. Then, in the pity of my great love for him, I said:

"Glynne, do not put your shame into words. I know it all. I have heard it all. I will not reproach you, for, if you have one spark of honour left, your conscience will upbraid you more than any words of mine. Oh, Glynne, what madness possessed you to act as you have done —to bring such disgrace on the name you bear?"

My voice was hoarse and broken—my eyes blinded with tears. Glynne looked at me, then suddenly threw himself down at my feet in an agony of self-abasement.

"Oh, Rita, pity me! I was mad, desperate; I did not know what I was about. And you know it; he has discovered it! Oh, what shall I do."

He was so young—my brother. He

looked such a boy even then, as he knelt before me in an agony of shame and terror and remorse; his bright young face hidden in the folds of my dress; his fair head bowed in the very dust with the shame of his own rash deed. I looked at him, and a great intense pity for his weakness throbbed in my heart. I laid my hands on the bent and sorrowful head. I said gently, with no tears then:

"Glynne, look up. True penitence will perhaps win you forgiveness of your sin. And now listen to me. I have promised your secret shall be safe; I will bear its burden—for your sake. I am going to be Sir Arthur Sydney's wife."

For one brief instant my brother's eyes met mine, and I could see the revulsion of feeling in that glad expression of relief. I knew he felt the full sense of his safety;

but ah, I knew, too, that the knowledge brought its own bitterness, its own punishment! His better nature triumphed; and as he spoke to me the hot tears arose in the passionate remorse of his boyish weakness, and rolled down his white, uplifted face.

"Oh, Rita, Rita!" he said in a voice low and broken, and passionate with grief and misery. "It must not be! You don't love this man. I know you almost hate him, and just to save and shelter me from the punishment of my own wrong-doing you sacrifice yourself. My darling, it is no marriage for you; he will never make you happy; and why should you be miserable? No, Rita; by my own rash act I fell, by my own disgrace I will abide. Why should I make you the sufferer for my sins?"

"Oh, Glynne!" I answered wearily. "You forget that your disgrace is not a

thing you can bear alone, not a thing you can fight with single-handed. The honour of our name is concerned in this, and, whatever you may deserve, I am too proud to bear such lasting dishonour. I have nothing left to live for now." —My voice faltered, but I steadied it with a strong effort, though the tears rushed to my eyes as I went on speaking. "Glynne, you know how well I loved—him. So well, that had he been true I fear I could never have done what I mean to do now, even to save you, dear. But that is all over now, and I must try to forget it. Don't grieve so," I added mournfully, for his tears fell like rain upon my hands. "It will not be so—very —hard. Perhaps just at first a little pain for me, Glynne, for I must wrench from my heart all thought of that other love. I must try to forget it was such

a happy reality; but then, my darling, your honour will be saved, and who have I to care for now but you?"

He threw his arms round me, and we mingled our tears together; but in that moment of pain and anguish I knew we were once more the brother and sister of old times.

Glynne told me there, in the solitude of the little shadowy wood, the story of his temptation and his fall. He had learnt to gamble, not recklessly at first, but still by little and little the fatal fascination seized him, and he became deeply in debt. He applied to my father for money and was sternly refused. Then, in a moment of desperation, his brain dizzy with wine, his heart reckless with despair, he had forged the cheque I had seen. When the act was beyond recall its full and terrible mean-

ing had burst upon him. and now—now when the fruits of his folly were revealed, when for his guilty act my innocence must pay the penalty—he seemed bowed and crushed to the very dust with the thought of what he had done.

Poor Glynne — poor. wavering, foolish boy! You suffered then, I know, but what was your suffering in comparison with mine? What was your burden when weighed with the one that I had to take up and bear in silence and in secret for long, long years?

When we were calmer and more resigned, we began to think of returning home. I do not know whether Glynne or myself shrank from the meeting with Sir Arthur with the greatest dread. We both put it off to the last moment, and then very slowly, very wearily, we left the little quiet wood which had witnessed our despair, and

turned our footsteps to the place where we had all agreed to meet for our return home.

"Rita," he said hesitatingly, "is it all over between you and Leslie, really? Have you not heard from him since that time when you mentioned the sudden cessation of his letters?"

"I have never had another line from him," I said, "not even in answer to my letter, when I begged him to let me have only one word to say he had not forgotten me."

"It is very strange," said Glynne. "I have not heard from him either. I cannot make it out. His last letter to me was just the same as usual — frank, hearty, cheerful, full of love for you, and——"

"Oh, don't, Glynne!" I interrupted in a broken voice. "I cannot bear it; let me forget him if I can. He can never be anything to me—now."

Glynne was silent and troubled.

"Oh, Rita," he said tenderly, at last, "how good you are; how true you are! My darling little sister. I will never in all my life again do any act to make you ashamed of me—from this moment I swear it. I will struggle against the temptation of those fatal cards. I will avoid the dice-box as a poisoned thing. I will never again wring your heart with the pain I have caused you to-day. Do you believe me, dear?"

"Yes, Glynne," I answered tearfully, as I looked up at him. "I do believe it; if I did not—oh, Glynne, I would pray to die now, for I could not bear such shame again and live!"

When we reached the rendezvous of the picnic party it was late in the afternoon. Many had started homewards; some were

just on the point of leaving. Sir Arthur was looking anxiously for me.

"Don't leave me, Glynne," I whispered hurriedly. "I cannot bear to be alone with him—yet."

Glynne obeyed, and we went home in the same order as we had come; only Glynne sat near me all the way, and bore the brunt of the conversation. He was very confused and nervous at first, but he exerted himself for my sake, and, in spite of the awkwardness of the situation, Sir Arthur treated him in just his usual manner. But, oh, how I longed for the drive to be over, for the shelter and solitude of my own room!

It was quite evening when we arrived, and most of the visitors went to their respective chambers to prepare for the ball. I felt too utterly wearied and spent to

appear at it. I went languidly and slowly upstairs, and shut myself in my room, and then threw myself down upon the bed, and closed my eyes.

My head ached, my brain seemed to swim, and I sank into a stupor that for a time robbed me even of thought. The world and the things of the world seemed dead to me. I could not speak or move.

A knock at the door roused me, and the voice of Lady Ramsay was audible demanding admittance. I bade her come in.

"What, lying down, and all in the dark? Why, Rita, everyone is dressed, and in the ballroom. Are you ill?"

"I hope so," I said mournfully, as she lighted the candles on my dressing-table and then came over to me, and looked long and anxiously at my colourless face, my dry and burning eyes. "I hope I *am* ill,

Lady Ramsay. I wish I were going to die!"

"Good Heaven, child!" she exclaimed in real alarm. "What makes you talk like that? Has anything happened since the picnic?"

"A great deal has happened!" I answered, sitting up and making a strong effort at composure.

"You—has Sir Arthur proposed?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes." I felt the hot blood rush to my face, and I dared not meet her eyes. What would she think after all I had said?

"And you—what did you say?"

Her voice trembled with anxiety. For a moment I kept silence. I had not thought it would be so hard to put my deed into words.

"I said—yes."

"You did?" There was a ring of surprise in her voice as well as triumph. "And after all your tirade against him? You really are the most extraordinary girl!"

"I suppose I am," I answered, sinking wearily back upon my pillows. "However, extraordinary or not, my fate is sealed. Your arduous duties as chaperon have been brought to a successful issue."

"I am glad you took my advice," she went on triumphantly. "It really will be a great marriage for you. But why on earth did you make such a scene, and declare you hated him? But there, I suppose girls are all alike."

"Of course they are," I said bitterly. "Ready to sell themselves to the highest bidder the moment they're asked."

"You have a very unpleasant way of

putting things," said Lady Ramsay irritably. "You will never make friends if you go on as you have been doing. However, I am glad you have acted sensibly for once. Though, after what you said, I confess I am surprised. However, life is prose, not romance, as I suppose you have learnt."

"That I certainly have," I said bitterly.

"All girls are alike," murmured Lady Ramsay, contemplating me with languid curiosity. "They always talk a lot of nonsense about love and constancy, and all that stuff, before marrying sensibly. You are just like the rest, I see. What is it? Are you faint?"

I struggled against the dizzy, dreamy feeling that seemed creeping over me. I did not want to betray my weakness to her.

"The sudden — happiness — has been too much for me, I suppose," I said at

last. "You have not yet congratulated me!"

She came near and attempted to kiss my cheek; but I shivered and drew hastily away.

"No, don't," I cried passionately. "Leave me alone with my misery; do not try me too much. Congratulations are scarcely needed in my case. I think you might have guessed that! Keep them for the happy bridegroom, Lady Ramsay."

"Hush, Rita!" she answered anxiously and almost timidly. "Don't get so excited, your looks quite frighten me. I shall have you laid up with brain-fever if you go on like this. Why, your hands burn like fire."

I sank wearily back upon the pillow again.

"You had better go to your guests," I said. "Give them the good news, Lady

Ramsay, and receive the triumph of envy from all the disappointed mothers. But tell them, if you like, that I would rather die to-night than feel I was Sir Arthur's promised wife."

"You wicked girl!" exclaimed my horrified stepmother. "How can you say such dreadful things? If you have accepted Sir Arthur, you have done the wisest thing I have known you do in all my experience of you. As for saying you would rather die than marry him and be mistress of fifteen thousand a year, why I call it flying in the face of Providence to utter such words."

"Pray don't enumerate the advantages of that fifteen thousand a year again. I have already heard enough of it," I said coldly. "Let it content you to know I have accepted it, sold myself for it. I have fetched a fair price, have I not? Sir

Arthur's taste is singular, though. He buys a wife who detests him, and pays fifteen thousand a year for the luxury of her—dislike!"

"Really, Rita, if you are going to say such shocking things, I cannot remain and listen to them," said Lady Ramsay with virtuous indignation. "You are over-excited and over-fatigued. Let me send you a composing draught, and, after a good night's rest, you will feel quite different."

I made no answer. I closed my eyes and turned wearily away.

She touched my burning forehead with her cool soft hand, and then I heard the rustle of her trailing silken skirts as she left me to my solitude once more. The door closed, and in a few moments opened softly again to admit her French maid Hortense with the draught she had promised.

I took it; I was passive enough now, too wearied for resistance, too spent for words. Hortense helped me to undress and then left me for the night, bidding me "*dormez bien.*"

Sleep well! I laughed bitterly as I heard the wish. Sleep, rest, what were they? Blessings not meant for me, only for those whose minds were at peace, whose souls were untroubled, who had no knowledge of the lasting shame that would be mine in the future, of which I dreaded to think—the future that would see me Sir Arthur Sydney's wife.

Would any envy me my title? Ah, if they guessed the price at which I purchased it, the loathing with which I thought of it, they would know that the poorest peasant girl who laboured in the fields, who wandered through the lanes with her lover's hand in hers, was

a thousand times happier, a thousand times more blest than I!

I was going to take upon myself the heaviest bondage a woman's heart can know, a loveless, heartless marriage? I should never know the rapture such a union brings when love goes hand in hand with its sacred vows, its blessed unity. I should never feel the rapturous ecstasy which only two hearts that beat with one love can give. Such dreams were dead, such hopes were lost to me.

I did not weep then as I thought of it. Some grief is beyond tears.

CHAPTER XXIII.

After all I did not have the luxury of being ill.

I rose from my bed the next day, and the next, and, though my face was wan and colourless, my eyes full of dumb silent misery, no one seemed to notice it. Why should they?

Society would scarcely be so impolite as to tell a *fiancée*, so lucky as I was supposed to be, that her looks were not in keeping with her good fortune. Glynne noticed it of course, but, except by tender unspoken sympathy and loving attentions,

he never appeared to do so. Sir Arthur had gone to town to make all arrangements for our marriage. It was to take place as soon as the *trousseau* and settlements were ready, for the bridegroom was impatient of delay, and the bride—indifferent.

Lady Ramsay was in the seventh heaven of delight; she meant the wedding to be a grand one, she informed me. No expense was to be spared, no extravagance was too great. Perhaps she thought pomp and show would cover the heartlessness and mockery of the ceremony.

I insisted upon Glynne's paying back the money to Sir Arthur. I gave him one hundred pounds myself, and the remainder he was to repay by instalments. I ventured timidly to tell Sir Arthur of this before he left, and asked him if he would give me the fatal cheque.

"You shall have it on our wedding-day," he answered coolly.

I shuddered at those words. Then I remembered I had promised to purchase Glynne's secret with myself, and I said no more.

Sir Arthur wrote to me daily. Costly presents arrived from him, and every letter was filled with eager longings for the happy day that was to make me his. He knew—oh, surely he must have known!—I did not love him. I did not even care for him with the interest and sympathy of a friend, and yet he was determined to marry me. Oh, if only I could have escaped! If only there had been any other way to purchase Glynne's safety! I bore up bravely before him; I did not wish him to see how hard, how terribly hard was the struggle that tormented me now.

The days went madly, swiftly by; so

fast, so horribly fast it seemed to me. In a few weeks more we were to go to London; in another two months I should be Marguerite Ramsay no longer. At times I prayed to Heaven for some escape from the fate I dreaded; for death, for illness, anything that would avert it, but in vain. My frenzied prayers, my wild petitions were unanswered. I strove to be resigned, calm, content; but the struggle grew harder day by day.

Three months have passed by—three weary months of pain and grief to me. To-morrow will be — my wedding-day. Ah me, with what shy rapture, what flush and ecstasy of joy I once thought to have said those words! Now I shudder as I pace my room alone. I think of them with the loathing and the horror that I cannot shake off or evade.

It was my last night of liberty; the hours were few and short now between me and the new life of which I dreaded to think. I felt as if I were committing a great sin; I could not even pray. No words would come in my despair, no gleam of Heaven's pity shone upon my soul.

One task still remained, a task from which I had shrunk again and again, but from which I dared not shrink any longer. To-night I must bring forth my lost, dead love, and every memory belonging to it, and bid them an eternal farewell.

Could I do it? Did I believe I was doing it? I fear not. I knew I was deceiving myself, I knew that at the sight of Leslie's face, the sound of Leslie's voice, my love would all spring to life again—all rise in wild, overmastering force, and falsify every effort to proclaim it conquered.

It is a terrible thing to love as I loved, so madly, fervently, and idolatrously. I thought so as I took his letters, the letters I had treasured so long, so vainly all this weary time. I threw them into the fire. I watched them burn and shrivel in the flames, till nothing but a heap of ashes lay upon the hearth. Ah, if only my love could have been torn from my heart, and destroyed in like manner!

"Oh, Leslie, my darling, why were you not true?" I moaned out in my agony. "Why are you not here to save me now?"

I forgot at that moment that, even if he were beside me, I could not wed him. I had Glynne's secret to keep, Glynne's honour to save. I must go through with it, cost what it might. But for a while I heard nothing, saw

nothing. I threw myself down upon the soft rug before the fire, and with my face buried in my hands I wept as women weep by the grave of some lost dead they have buried. Not knowing what I did, I stretched my arms to the shadows, and cried aloud:

"Oh, my love, my love, come back to me!"

All the passion and intensity of my nature craved and called for him. But there was only the echo of my own voice, only the dull ceaseless throbbing of my own heart. And the slow hours passed, and the night waned, and deepened and passed away; and the first gray pallor of the wintry dawn found me still stretched there; lost to every sense and sound and feeling; lost to every hope and joy for evermore; lost even to the recollection that the daylight

brought; lost to the mingled fear and dread, the shrinking and the shame of this "my wedding-day."

A few hours later and I was arrayed for the sacrifice. A murmur of admiration floated through the room as I entered. The family were all assembled there, and my bridesmaids were waiting the signal to leave for church.

"If you had only a little more colour you would be quite perfect, Rita," said my stepmother as she surveyed me with those cold, critical eyes of hers.

I turned away silently. The glass at the end of the room showed a face white as the fleecy laces that enveloped me—a face with great, dark, woful eyes that were circled with heavy shadows, and quivering lips that locked back the wildest and most frenzied words a woman's

heart ever longed to utter. I saw the sheen of glistening satin, the shower of gossamer lace, the waxen, fragile blossoms which were to me the insignia of this most loathsome bondage upon which I was about to enter, and I shuddered with horror at the sight. As I turned away I met Glynne's pitying gaze, and the wordless, unspoken sympathy gave me sudden self-command.

"For his sake, for my darling boy," I said to myself; "oh, Heaven, give me strength just a little longer!"

There was a sudden bustle and confusion. The bridesmaids were leaving. Fred and Lady Ramsay, followed by my father, took them to the carriage, and then Glynne and I were alone. I met his beseeching eyes; swiftly, eagerly he came to me.

"My darling, Heaven bless you, and make you happier than you anticipate. Does it seem very hard, Rita?"

"Hard," I said mournfully, with a sudden break and quiver in my voice that threatened the destruction of my hard-won composure; "well, it is not easy, dear—just at first."

My brother turned suddenly away, and a sigh escaped his lips.

"Why, Glynne," I said, with a feeble attempt at cheerfulness, "what is the matter? You foolish boy, don't fret about me. All girls feel a little strange, and—and—saddened when they go away from home, and enter upon a new life, like marriage. But it may turn out well, dear. I daresay I shall be as happy as other people—in—in—time."

Feebler and feebler grew my voice, tears were dangerously near it. I had wept

so much, I wondered there were any more left.

Glynne came to me again, his eyes dim, his voice shaken and tremulous.

"Rita, if you are not happy, if he ever gives you a moment's pain or sorrow, I shall never forgive myself. Oh, my darling, if I could only spare you!"

"Hush," I whispered softly, laying my head for one brief moment on his shoulder, giving myself the bliss of resting in his arms, though his tender caresses unnerved me so. "I shall do very well, Glynne; don't make it worse by reproaches. Oh, I forgot," I cried suddenly, as I started from his arms, and took a small folded paper from my dress. "Glynne, let us burn this now. Sir Arthur sent it to me at last. As long as he had it, it seemed like a drawn sword over my head."

I handed him the fatal cheque. He tossed it into the fire, while the hot blood dyed his face with shame and confusion. Then voices called, my father appeared, and with one hurried, fervent embrace, Glynne left me.

It was my turn now. The carriage waited; I could not draw back even if I would.

I breathed one eager prayer for strength and calmness, and then I followed my father to the carriage and was whirled away through the clear frosty sunshine of the wintry air to the side of the bridegroom who awaited me.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THAT day—that dreadful day, how long and wearisome it seemed! What an empty, heartless mockery! What a vain and frivolous show! How I bore up, how I went through it I hardly know. I had to smile and talk and listen, to hear healths drunk and speeches made; and all the time my head throbbed, my pulses beat with fever-force, my hands burned like fire.

My nerves were strung to their utmost tension. Sometimes I felt as if the strain were beyond bearing, as if I must shriek out my agony in the wildest, maddest

words that ever entered human brain; but I struggled on. I did not give way, and presently a great dead calm seemed to settle on my heart.

I caught Lady Ramsay's eye; the signal was given to retire, and I went up to take off my bridal finery and put on the handsome travelling-dress in which I was to make the first stage of my journey. We were going to Paris, Sir Arthur having expressed his opinion that all other places were so "confoundedly slow," a fellow couldn't possibly exist a month in them.

My husband's spirits being unusually elated by reason of unlimited champagne, he talked even more freely and boisterously than was his wont—made jokes and applauded them himself, and altogether conducted himself in a manner singularly obnoxious and distasteful to me. My cold looks, my languid replies, my indifferent

manners had not the least effect upon him. He made no secret of his triumph and elation, and seemed never tired of repeating to me how he had vowed when he first met me that he would do his best to win me for his wife, no matter who stood in his way.

"And I've done it, by Jove!" he said at last, as we stood in the private sitting-room of the hotel at Dover waiting for dinner. "I never was beaten yet in anything I'd set my mind on. Come, Rita, don't you think we'll be very jolly together? Give me a kiss and say yes, my darling. You've never kissed me yet, do you know that?"

He put his arm round me, and drew me roughly towards him. I had borne a great deal. I could not bear that cool sense of proprietorship. I tore myself away from his hateful embrace, and fled like one

possessed. I only reached the door. Then a dizziness and blindness came upon me. The long strain I had put upon myself could hold out no longer. Power and feeling left me, and I fell upon the floor at Sir Arthur's feet in blissful unconsciousness.

What passed after this I hardly know, except that I was very ill—alarmingly ill. I knew nothing—felt nothing—only lay from day to day in a state of semi-consciousness. I saw figures moving—heard voices whispering in hushed and softened tones, but I neither knew nor cared where I was or what had happened.

I was like a stunned, half-senseless creature. My heart still beat, but feeling and interest and power seemed all gone. Despair and longing were dead; love and passion were at rest. No voices from the past

tormented me, no whispers of the future maddened me with their terrible fears.

From hour to hour, from day to day, I lay in that same senseless stony stupor. No worse, but no better.

Blankness and despair followed; dreamy stupor and senseless apathy. So the days passed, still on and on, ever the same. Was I going to die? I hoped it, I longed for it. Ah, how peaceful and calm and silent would the grave be! When would they come and carry me there? When should I follow my dead mother into the silent land whither she beckoned me? Would Leslie be there and Glynne? They both stood gazing at me—how sorrowful they looked! Why could I not go to them? I raised myself on my elbow and leaned eagerly forward.

"Pray don't rise, my lady," a voice

said. "You are to keep perfectly still and quiet."

I was laid gently back on the pillows again, and I gazed at my companion in wonder. Who was this? And was I dreaming still?

"Why do you call me 'my lady,'" I said; I am Marguerite Ramsay, am I not?"

"Poor young thing, she is still wandering," said the kind voice, evidently addressing someone else who was invisible.

"Who are you?" I repeated impatiently. "And who am I? How did I come here?"

"You are Lady Sydney, my lady," was the reply; "do you not remember? Your husband has been nearly terrified to death about you. You were taken ill suddenly an hour or two after your

arrival at the hotel, and he has had doctors from London to see you every day, and I am here to nurse you, my lady; and now you must not speak another word. Lie down and keep very quiet; the doctor will be here in half an hour."

I lay down. I was quite still—quite quiet then.

"Lady Sydney, Lady Sydney"—I murmured this to myself again and again. "So I am Lady Sydney. I am married." Ah, it all came back to me then! I turned away and buried my face in the pillow, and wept and sobbed till I was exhausted. By those very tears, by that passion-storm of grief, my life was saved—but oh, my heart was worse than dead! How hard it was to kill the existence that I hated! Would nothing ever do it? Would nothing make my heart-beats

cease, and my throbbing pulses stop, and the life-current stagnate in my veins?

Thoughts like these—wicked, impious thoughts were all my gratitude for returning life, for the strength that slowly and surely crept back to my feeble frame, and woke in my heart again the sense of its own misery.

CHAPTER XXV.

It pressed on my life like lead, the dead weight of my marriage bond.

I could not reconcile myself to this new life; it was worse—oh, how much worse!—than even my anticipations! Was I very wicked, very sinful? I fear it, but, strive and struggle as I might, my indifference and dislike to Sir Arthur only increased as time went on. We had no thoughts, no tastes, no feelings in common. His roughness disgusted, his coarseness shocked me, and I could not always play the

hypocrite so well as to prevent his seeing it.

One thing I did not know when I married him, and that was his habits of intemperance. Night after night he reeled home in a condition that frightened and shocked me; it bordered on two extremes, either of exceeding affection or violent dislike. In the latter instance he abused me and Glynne, and everyone belonging to us, in language such as had never greeted my ears before; and yet I preferred it to the former, when he overwhelmed me with caresses from which I shrank in terror and disgust.

The first three months of my married life were an ordeal from which the strongest woman might well shrink; and I was weak, and helpless, and alone! I was glad to leave Paris, which we did as soon as the London season began. I

hoped, sometimes, that in town at least he would behave differently, or that I might see less of him. These were strange feelings for a three months' bride.

The house in Park Lane had been refurnished and redecorated in honour of its new mistress. The world called upon me to show myself in the glories of my title and wealth, and "Lady Sydney" appeared in society for the first time since her marriage.

I entered recklessly and madly upon my new career. I plunged into every dissipation, every amusement, however frivolous and vain it seemed. I was determined to give myself no leisure for thought if possible.

Sir Arthur was proud of the admiration I received as "his" wife. I had no reason to complain of his generosity. It was almost too much, I sometimes thought.

No one had more magnificent jewels, more expensive dresses than I had. My carriage was the admiration of the Row, the horses were so perfectly matched, the appointments in such excellent taste. I had all that the heart of woman could desire—so the world thought—and yet I was so thankless, so wearied of it all!

The season was at its height. The nights and days were laden with amusements. I mingled in all the gaiety and excitement. I lived in one incessant whirl, from the hour I awoke in the morning till I sought my couch at night, and laid my languid limbs to rest in the utter weariness of bodily fatigue.

Sir Arthur was seldom with me now. He had made me over to the chaperonage of Lady Hetherington, a distant relative of his own. She was a wealthy dowager with

two unmarried daughters, the youngest of whom, a gushing damsel of thirty summers, had conceived a violent attachment for me. I sometimes thought that Glynne was the attraction. She invariably contrived to meet him at my house, or to be with me when she knew he was my escort. I took little interest in her or in her good-natured mother, who was the laziest and most simple-minded of chaperons.

But there was little need to guard me. I did not do as so many others of my fashionable acquaintances did. In spite of my lonely home, my loveless, neglected life, and the temptations which surrounded me, I looked with horror on the lax morality which tempted so many of my sex. I took no lover from the flatterers who surrounded me to console me for all my husband lacked.

In that alone I differed from the fashionable women among whom I lived. They each had their pet intrigue, their favourite "lion;" their platonic, harmless intimacies. But I—never. Love for me was dead; in all the world there would never be another who would bring back the old sweet sorcery of joys that were pure as a maiden's dreams, and tender as a poet's idyls.

Men called me "cold." I laughed as I heard it; they little knew what they said. Cold to them, perhaps, because I was indifferent.

Ah, there is no woman so cold as she who has *once* loved! How tuneless are the strings that other hands touch, to wake no answering melody! It has been all poured forth, long ago; all the richness and fulness of its sounds, all the passion and pathos of its notes;

and the song can never be sung again to gladden another ear.

I thought when I married Sir Arthur that I had felt the keenest anguish I could ever know, that the torture of my life-long bondage was a grief no other could exceed: but I was wrong. Though no words could adequately describe my feelings when I knew I was his wife, though no power could paint the sufferings I endured, or the loathing, shameful horror which possessed me at that time, I was yet to find fiercer grief, to battle with a deadlier temptation than I pictured to myself as possible. My cup was not yet full, my powers of endurance not yet sufficiently tried.

One evening I had accepted an invitation to Lady Hetherington's to dinner. Sir Arthur accompanied me, and Lady Ramsay and Glynne were also there. In the joy of

seeing my brother, whom I did not expect to meet, I was more animated and talkative than I often troubled myself to be. He sat on one side of me at dinner, and an elderly, quiet-looking individual who had taken me down, and to whom I had been introduced on my arrival, sat on the other. I forget his name. I believe he was a baronet, but he had not seemed particularly interesting to me, and so I had not paid any attention to his title.

There was the usual babble of small-talk going on around me, and I was listening carelessly to it all, when suddenly I heard a name which struck sharply on my ear, and turned my attention in straining, breathless eagerness to hear what followed. Miss Hetherington was speaking to my companion.

"Colonel Macgregor, now Sir Aubrey," she said, "not Major. Oh yes; he is

expected home daily. A friend of his told me that he ought to be here by the end of this month at the latest. He is quite a hero now!"

That was all I heard.

My heart sank like a stone; a dull, throbbing sound was in my ears. The lights and flowers all swam before me. Was I going to faint? Was I going to make a scene before all these people?

Glynne's voice roused me.

"For Heaven's sake, Rita," he whispered, "don't look like that. Try to command yourself. Drink some of your wine, dear. You will feel better then."

With a desperate effort at self-control I obeyed. I raised my glass to my trembling lips and swallowed some of its contents. But for a moment I felt as if the world and the people were all gone, as if the earth had suddenly stood still, and the

light and the warmth all faded out of it, leaving me alone in the blackness and darkness around.

Glynne had heard the words, and understood my agitation. He pressed my hand silently as it lay idly on my lap, and that unspoken sympathy calmed my agitation. Life and memory came back. I remembered who I was. Lady Sydney now. What was Leslie to me, or I to him? I was a wife, the property of that hard-voiced, vulgar-looking man opposite, who was vaunting some hunting exploit to his neighbour.

Ah yes! Sentiment and romance must be banished now. What had I to do with the weakness of girlish love, that makes a cheek flush hotly, a heart throb wildly at the mere sound of a name, the mere echo of a voice she hears as no other hears, or ever will hear it unless

they love as she loves? I thought my love was conquered, subdued, dead. A chance word had shown me my mistake! I had not yet learnt to forget.

From this time I was in one incessant dread of meeting Leslie Macgregor again. I knew that we were almost sure to meet sooner or later, and now I never went to a ball or a fête, an opera or a garden-party, without a shiver of nervous dread at any approaching figure, whose height, or face, or walk bore some resemblance to Leslie Macgregor.

Once I besought Sir Arthur to take me away from London; to go anywhere so that I was removed from the haunting fear that was making me perfectly wretched, that filled me with a nervous dread, a tremor of agitation, until I had not a moment's peace. But he refused.

A month passed and I was still safe.

I had not seen him, though I knew he had arrived: I heard of him continually. I schooled my voice to appear indifferent, my face to keep its colourless repose; but I could not make my wildly beating heart be still, or my pulses throb less painfully as I listened.

My darling had won many honours—he had been brave, steadfast, enduring—many tongues praised him, many voices spoke of him, and I—I alone was silent because I dared not speak. I could not utter his name in the conventional phrases of society. I could not call him other than he was to me—my Leslie, my one and only love. Though lost to me for ever, he was not one whit less the love of my girlish dreams—the hero of my first romance.

I could not live down the memory of the past. No; though it was sin, deadly,

shameful sin for me, a wife, to think and to feel like this for another man, I could not conquer it or trample it under foot. I brought pride to the rescue. I told myself that he had forgotten me—deceived me.

Ah! pride is great, but love is greater; pride is strong, but love is stronger! I only prayed wild passionate prayers that I might never see him more—or, seeing him, might die ere love betrayed my weakness.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I AM going to the House to-night, Rita, to hear the debate. You'll have to go to Lady Gordon's ball by yourself, after all."

Sir Arthur said this one night, as he came into my boudoir. My maid had just left me and I was standing alone before the long pier-glass contemplating my toilette.

"Can't you really come?" I asked, turning towards him. "I don't care to go alone there—she is almost a stranger to me."

"What are the Hetheringtons about that they can't go with you?" he questioned, as he came forward and surveyed me. "You look uncommonly nice to-night, Rita. 'Pon my word, I've half a mind to come with you, after all."

"Please yourself," I answered wearily, as I bent over the fastening of my glove. "I shall not stop there long. I feel so tired of all this gaiety."

"Well, it'll soon be over," he said, taking up a bracelet from the table. "Then you shall have a taste of country life. I mean you to go to the Towers this winter and have some hunting. But I say, Rita, how is it you've got no jewels on to-night? Why don't you wear your diamonds?"

"I don't care for ornaments—they don't suit this dress," I answered with a rising flush, as I remembered the real reason of

my aversion. I hated to wear his gifts —to parade his wealth to the world.

"Stuff and nonsense! Don't suit the dress! I wonder what you'll say next." And he began to pace angrily up and down the room.

"Well, why don't you put them on?" he demanded presently.

I looked calmly up at him.

"It is something new for you to trouble yourself about what I wear," I observed quietly. "I have told you before I don't care for ornaments, and I have so many flowers, I do not want jewels."

"By Jove! I've the greatest mind to take every blessed one of them away and give them to——" He stopped and hesitated.

"Mademoiselle Clotilde?" I interrogated. "Oh, you need not hesitate about saying

it out, Sir Arthur. All the world knows it now."

He muttered an imprecation, and without another word strode out of the room and slammed the door.

I sighed wearily as I sank down upon a low cushioned *fauteuil* to await the summons to my carriage. Such scenes as these, alas! were only too common now. I had become used to them.

I knew that Sir Arthur was not only a neglectful but also an unfaithful husband. His brief passion for me had long spent itself. Perhaps my own indifference had helped to chill it, but I could not pretend to what I did not feel—what it was not in my nature to feel for him. I was his wife. I could receive his guests, and sit at his table, and do the honours of his house, but for aught else I might

as well have been his footman or his groom now.

Six months—and this was my life. This was the existence I must look forward to so long as we both lived. I shuddered as I thought of it—shuddered as I sat there in my lonely splendour and remembered the price I had paid for it all.

The clock on the chimney-piece had struck eleven, and, as I raised my head at the sound, a knock at the door told me the carriage was waiting for me.

I rose to my feet, and my maid entered with my shawl and bouquet to attend me downstairs.

"Has Sir Arthur left?" I asked, as I took the flowers from her hand.

"Yes, my lady; some time ago."

I went out silently, and in a few moments more was driving through the

lighted streets on my way to Lady Gordon's ball.

The rooms were already filled when I arrived, and dancing had long commenced. I sat beside my hostess for some time watching the brilliant scene. The heat was very great, and on that plea I declined dancing.

Lady Gordon suggested at last that we should visit the conservatories, and, nothing loath, I accompanied her thither.

How beautiful they were, how cool and fragrant and quiet after the heat of the crowded ballroom! We sat down and talked of all the idle trifles, and fashionable scandals, the varied events of the season. Presently she was summoned to the ballroom by her husband, and, after receiving my repeated assurance that I would far rather remain where I was, she left me alone.

I wandered slowly on to the furthest end of the conservatories—they were quite deserted. Fragrant scents made the atmosphere heavy with their odours; fountains sent their silvered spray up to the fretted roof above; great flowering shrubs laden with blossoms surrounded me.

As I stood at the end and looked up the long vista of lights and foliage, I thought I had rarely seen anything so beautiful. Suddenly I descried a little door beside me, and, moved by an impulse of curiosity, I put my hand on the lock to open it. I felt the rush of the cool night air on my brow, and saw a little balcony before me almost covered with trailing creepers and flowers. I stood a moment looking up at the clear starlit sky, half-inclined to leave the conservatory and go out to this tempting retreat. While I hesitated, holding the

door open still, I heard a footstep approaching in the distance.

Nearer and nearer it came, and, angry that I had not taken advantage of my solitude before it was too late, I looked straight towards the intruder.

The light shone full upon his face. A cry—a faint, breathless cry—fell from my lips as I saw it, recognised it, almost before he saw my own. My fears were realised at last. In another instant I stood face to face with—Leslie Macgregor!

In that moment I think I lived a lifetime; it seemed as if every joy and pain my heart could hold were all centred and concentrated in those few brief seconds of time, when my darling stood before me once again, with the light shining on his white despairing face, and his heart speaking to mine through the mournful passion of his eyes.

"Rita! Oh Heaven, is it you?"

That was all he said. I stood dumb and motionless before him, gazing at him as only a woman gazes on the face of one she loves. I loved him so! Great Heaven, how mad I was! And he, had he forgotten me?

Not then, not then, as with passionate despair he caught me to his heart and held me there again as a man holds some dear and precious thing that has been restored to him from the gates of death. In that moment neither of us thought or knew what we did. The lights went whirling by, the shadows flew around me like eddying waters. My eyes closed beneath his kisses, my senses reeled and fled before his gaze.

Then all grew dark, and the deathlike silence of a great stillness held us. I prayed —oh, how I prayed!—that I might die

then—die in that trance of passion that made me oblivious of all the past, that left me conscious of the one fact that Leslie held me in his arms again. But then, like a lightning flash, came thought and memory and shame.

Was I so weak, so mad, so vile a thing as to forget my duty as a wife, my honour as a woman, and rest in the arms, and thrill with the kisses of another man?

I shuddered and snatched myself from his embrace. His arms dropped, his eyes gazed at me with the piteous dumb entreaty of a man heart-broken, desperate with sorrow.

"Forgive me," he said. "I forgot!"

Then suddenly his voice changed; it grew fierce and stern as he seized my hands and made me face him once again.

"Tell me why you have done this? Is this your faith, is this your love?

I thought you were true. Oh, Heaven, is every woman so false that a man's whole heart counts for nothing in her sight?"

I trembled from head to foot. Twice, thrice I essayed to speak, but no words would come; at last I cried wildly:

"I false! What can you mean? Say rather you, you who forgot me so quickly—you who won my trust and faith, only to cast them aside as worthless, who have left me to suffer in silence and neglect, till now my whole life is wrecked and lost for ever, ever more!"

He looked at me in blank bewilderment, in incredulous wonder, as if doubting the evidence of his senses.

"What!" he cried, as I gazed at him. "What is this you say, Rita? I false! Are you dreaming?"

I passed my hand in dumb bewilderment

over my eyes. Was I asleep, the victim of some too vivid dream. No, here I stood, and here before me my first love, the man I had never forgotten, and he said I was false—I!

"I—I don't know what you mean," I gasped.

"Don't know!"—and he laughed bitterly. "Lady Sydney is blessed with a short memory then; perhaps she does not know the contents of her last letter either?"

"My last letter," I echoed faintly. "It was the same as ever, Leslie; only beseeching you to give some word, some sign; and you never answered it."

"What are you saying?" he exclaimed, looking bewildered and confounded in his turn. "Look here; read this."

He tore open his coat, and took out a tiny leather letter-case.

"I always carry it about with me," he

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strange feeling came over me at that moment, as I thought that on two occasions a little sheet of paper had caused the two heaviest misfortunes of my life. Well may poets talk of the greatness of little things!

I read the letter slowly, scanning every word with careful intentness. Suddenly a thought flashed across my mind. The letter was a clever forgery, I knew—but whose? Whose? My heart told me all too well. The treacherous woman who had done this shameful deed was Lady Ramsay, my stepmother.

I knew her handwriting resembled mine; but she had evidently copied it carefully and exactly, so as to deceive Leslie. This letter was an ingenious and successful fraud —nothing else, and the act of a spiteful, treacherous woman. I read the whole terrible truth then, and told Leslie all.

He looked like a man to whom some hand has dealt a blow.

"Lady Ramsay has done it," I cried; "she vowed I should never marry you. Ah, she has kept her word too well—too well!"

All the misery and sorrow and despair of the past years came back to me—all she had made me suffer and endure—all the foul treachery which had wrecked my life in its fair and brilliant promise. Then Leslie's voice broke upon my ear, hoarse and agonised with mental suffering:

"If this be true, may Heaven's greatest punishment fall upon her, for all she has given me to bear. Oh, Rita! And I have lost you more utterly than if death had divided us; between our lives now there stretches a gulf so black, so deep——"

He ceased abruptly. Through the strong iron-knit frame a shudder ran. His eyes

gazed down on me with dumb, passionate misery. Afar off the music swelled and died away; the scents and fragrance of blossoms filled the air around us; and we —we stood there blind, deaf, insensible to it all, only knowing too late the secret of our broken hearts.

"Come out here," Leslie said suddenly, opening the little door near which we stood.

I obeyed him silently. Together we passed out into the hot sweet darkness of the summer night, where the great stars shone above us in the blue width of the stretching heavens, and the white moon hung like a silver lamp in the midst of a cloudless sky.

CHAPTER XXVII.

We were alone once more, my darling and I. All madness of despair, all hopelessness of love, all sweetness of our own passion, so true, so vain, was ours in that hour of reunion.

I looked up once more at the face I loved so well, and marvelled how doubt could ever have entered into my soul for one single moment. A warmth like the glow of summer was in my veins. It seemed so long, so long, since I had even known what it was to feel glad.

"If you care for me still why did you

marry?" asked Leslie at last. "Could you not have waited? When I first heard it, read it in the newspapers sent me from England, I could not believe it, could not believe my little pure-hearted girl had given herself up to another man so soon. Did you—do you love him?"

I tried to speak, but the words died away. I remembered Glynne; I could not speak of his shame.

"You *must* tell me that," cried Leslie with sudden fierceness. "I have a right to know. My love for you was no light puerile thing. It is part and parcel of myself; it lives with my life, and I cannot forget it. Heaven knows I have tried hard enough!"

"Have you?" I said weakly.

I could not help the feeling of unutterable gladness that swept over me at those wild words.

"Indeed I have," he answered gloomily.

"I used positively to hate you at times, because your face would come before me even when I was worst and most reckless, because your tone and some lingering echo of your voice would sound in my ears, and no woman's voice could drown it. Oh, my little love, you had the best of me, Heaven knows; and then, when I found you too were no nobler than others, I——"

"Hush!" I said, laying my hand upon his lips. "Don't tell me anything. I don't want to know; I don't want to hear. Let me think of you just as you were in those days; they were very happy days, weren't they, Leslie?"

"Happy?" He groaned aloud, and buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Heaven, only to have them back, only to know you loved me! You don't do that now, Rita, do you?"

I trembled exceedingly.

"I have never forgotten you," I faltered; and my eyes looked up to his as he dropped his hands, and for one moment let that old fond searching gaze meet mine.

"Thank Heaven for that!" he cried.

Then suddenly he wrapped his arms round me, and drew my head down upon his breast in the old imperious fashion.

"Were you fifty times a wife," he said fiercely, "yet none the less do I love you, and, if ever love had a right of its own, you are mine again. We have been parted by treachery; the fault is none of ours. Tell me one thing—only one thing, for the sake of the past. You said you had not forgotten me, do you love me still?"

"I—I have never ceased to love you," I whispered.

"Then, *then*, Rita," he cried exultingly,

as his arms held me more closely to his throbbing heart, "we shall not part again. Love alone sanctifies marriage. How can you put up with such an empty mockery as yours? Why, my little darling, the first moment I looked into your eyes, I saw that you were mine, heart and soul, as ever."

I turned faint and dizzy. I struggled away from those mastering arms, and trembled as I looked up at the passionate, exulting face of my girlhood's lover.

Memory was busy with me again. I shivered with dread as I thought of all the struggle yet before me.

"Don't go away from me," he said reproachfully. "I know what you feel, what you will say. Your marriage, shameful as it is, makes my words an insult. Ah, but my darling, there are moments in human lives when soul meets soul,

and all sophistries and worldly scruples are like so much waste paper in the fire of genuine feeling! This is such a moment for us two. Does not your woman's nature tell you what marriage should be, what love alone can make it? Then, is it a sacrifice I am asking, when I tell you that it would be no wrong to leave this man who owns you—for me?"

I stared aghast at him as he spoke. This was not my hero, my stainless ideal; this was but the man of whom I had heard, the man who had treated women as toys for his idle hours, and ridden rough-shod over obstacles and scruples all his life.

"You—you cannot mean what you say!" I faltered, bewildered and sick at heart, as I leant there against the cold iron rails.

"I *do* mean it," he said; and he bent

over me and took my cold and trembling hands back into the strong warm keeping of his own. "Oh, my darling, do not look at me so reproachfully! Don't you know—can't you fathom what my feelings must be at such a moment? To come here—to find you are another's—and yet know you love me—that I have lost you by the malignant spite of a jealous woman. Oh, darling, be merciful! Think of the agony I have had to bear—think what it is, to find you like this, mine still, yet—not mine!"

"I know—I know," I returned brokenly, and the tears came hot and swift to my eyes as I looked up at the bold handsome face I loved so dearly. "But, Leslie, what can I do—what can I do? A wrong is a wrong, argue how you may. I know what you mean, but I *could* not do it. You know what you are to me. You

know that I loved you as I can never love any man again, but it is too late now to talk of what might have been; our lives lie apart till—death."

He threw my hands aside with a sudden angry movement.

"Ah! you talk—you talk—like all women; your love is only for fair weather and smooth sailing! You have no thought of me, no pity for me. Is my whole life to be wrecked and ruined for your sake? Pshaw! You never could have loved me as I did you, or you would never have sold yourself to another man as you have done!"

They were hard words for me to bear—hard words when I knew that my constancy would have stood the fiercest test of time, had Fate not played me so scurvy a trick.

I could not tell him why I had married.

I dared say nothing of the misery and suffering and shame that had been my portion. I could only listen to his reproaches, and marvel dumbly, despairingly, why some hearts had so much suffering to bear. Something in my face perhaps touched him; I do not know; only suddenly he threw himself down before me, and, kneeling there, looked up at me with such agony of entreaty as shook me to the soul.

"My child—my little love—I have never knelt to any woman before; I have never prayed to one as I pray to you. Heaven help me!—there were few that needed prayers at all—but you are more than life to me. I love you ten thousand times more than when I parted from you years ago, and your innocent child-face looked so sorrowfully back at mine. Oh, Rita, pity me, and be merciful!"

He broke down utterly at these last words. Oh, how hard was the battle, how fierce the temptation that filled my whole nature at that moment!

To see the man I loved so well, bowed down in the passion of his grief, to feel the hot tears raining on my hands, tears which did not disgrace his manhood in that moment of despair. To feel and see this, and know my own heart craved and yearned to be with him, to lay my weary head on his breast, to rest for ever in the shelter of his arms, to know, and feel, and suffer this, was almost unbearable.

I looked upon all the fair promise of the joys I had for ever lost, the love that could never be mine again, save in the shame of a dishonoured life!

My hands trembled in his grasp; he showered kisses on them as he knelt. Twice

I essayed to speak, but I could find no words; then he raised his head and looked at me.

His face was bloodless, hueless as the dead, his eyes dark as night. How clearly and distinctly that face stood out against the background of the hanging leaves and the soft blue of the summer sky. Yet his own look was not so powerful a pleader as my heart, for never had I loved him as I loved him then.

Wild thoughts whirled through my brain; fierce conflicting passions racked my soul. I was so young, and such a long, long life seemed to stretch before me, all to be spent in the misery of loneliness, all to be weighted with the dead joys of a lost love.

How could I shut my ears at that moment to the sweet pleading of a passion

strong as death, desperate as the last struggle between life and the grave? Duty, poor feeble duty, seemed so weak when placed beside the temptation that urged me to forget it—the sweetness of the flower-strewn path where Love beckoned me to follow.

I almost yielded as I thought of it all. I almost placed myself in my darling's hands to do with as he would. I only heard the powerful pleading of a voice, whose music I had never forgotten. Almost I yielded to its soft persuasion.

I felt once more the sweetness of silent kisses, the gladness of laughing hours, the peace, and the beauty, and the magic of summer days long past, when love had bound us to one another in that sweet bond of pure content that holds

the joys of Heaven in its grasp, and makes the earth too blessed for us to dream of any life beyond.

Yes, I almost yielded to his prayers as he knelt before me then, his face looking upwards, his eyes seeking mine as the moonlight from above fell upon him, and his hands clasped me in their despairing entreaty. A word, and he was mine again. A thousandfold dearer than ever because our love had been tried so fiercely.

Then with a piteous cry I snatched myself away; I hid my face; I shut my eyes to the feverish passion of his looks; I breathed one last beseeching prayer for strength to conquer the tempting of this hour.

"Leslie," I faltered brokenly, "don't urge me. Don't try to blind me with sophistries. Only sin could make me

yours now, a sin that would for ever lose me all your respect and honour."

"You mistake," he said eagerly. "I never held an unworthy thought of you. I know how pure and good you are. It is not as if we had met only now. It is all that 'before' in both our lives that binds us to each other. Why, by now we should have been married; you would have been mine, my very own. Oh, darling, don't cast me off! How can I bear to lose you again?"

"Is it less hard for me?" I moaned despairingly. "It is cruel of you to tempt me."

"If you loved me——" he began.

"Oh, my darling!" I cried wildly. "Love! You know I love you; but, if you valued the best part of that love, you would try to save me from—myself.

Love is no love that tempts a woman to her own dishonour!"

He rose as I ceased speaking; he loosed my hands from his grasp, and staggered back against the railings of the little balcony on which we stood.

By the light of the moonbeams, as they played through the leafy shadows, I saw how deadly pale he was. There was a look upon his face that I had never seen, that I pray Heaven I never *may* see on a man's face again. It wore the settled calm of death. His voice was very low and broken as he said:

"Forgive me, Rita. I was mad, desperate. I didn't know what I said. I should have thought of you before myself. I should have known that to drag your tender womanhood through the mire of the world's infamy is not the way to prove my

love. But, oh, how hard it is to do right, how hard!"

Tears rained from my eyes, sobs shook my frame like a tempest. The weariness, the sadness of his voice robbed me of all self-control. No memory of where I was came to me, though voices sounded in the distance, and snatches of melody floated through the air. Though any moment our retreat might have been discovered, we never thought anything of the risk we ran, of the scandal we might have created.

We seemed so utterly alone, though the world was around us and about us on every side. We only felt that the stillness of the night was our security, the silence of the summer air our only witness. Leslie was quite quiet. He did not attempt to soothe me. He let me sob out my sorrow, quivering there in the over-mastering excess of

an emotion which shook me like a leaf in the whirlwind of a storm.

When it was over I lifted my eyes to his; all the glow and fervour of passion had died out of them; he was still and calm as a statue of despair.

"You do not blame me?" I murmured. "You do not doubt I love you? Oh, Leslie, it is not love that makes me hesitate; it is not love that teaches prudence in an hour like this. It is the higher instinct of the soul that speaks. It is a voice within my heart that warns me against a sin that would dishonour you as well as me; that would make the very sweetness of our love a bitterness and shame; that would rob our lives of every blessing, and poison all the years to come."

"My darling, cease!" he cried. "I know it all, I know it all. I told you I was a

bad fellow from the first; but cannot bad men love as well as good? And Heaven knows I love you."

"I believe it," I answered joyfully, even amidst my cruel pain; glad, so glad of his truth, his unshaken constancy.

"I was never worthy of you even at my best," he said moodily. "I told you that, did I not? But to lose you like this! It makes me mad when I think of it. I feel as if I could snatch you from that man's arms in defiance of every law of Heaven or man."

I shuddered at his wild words. I looked up at his face and saw how stormy it had grown. All that was best and worst in my darling's nature was at war now.

"I believe I could make you happy, despite everything," he went on. "But then, of course I have no right to say such words. Go back now—go to your new friends—

your new life. Don't stand there to mock me in my desolation."

"Mock you? Oh, Leslie!"

A sob broke my voice. I turned aside. I felt as if all my strength had gone—as if I could not resist his misery—his despair.

"Stop," he said hurriedly. "What am I saying? I talk as if you were to blame. Oh, Rita, Rita, why did we ever meet?"

His face looked haggard and drawn. Great scorching tears stood in his eyes. A word then—a single word of entreaty, and I should have been powerless to resist. Thank Heaven he spoke none. Thank Heaven that at last the good angel conquered, and all that was best and truest in the man I loved, saved us both in this terrible moment.

"Good-bye," he said huskily. "I have

felt you were right, and I—I have been a selfish brute all along; say you forgive me. We may never meet again. I pray not, unless—but oh, when do things ever come right in this wretched world? I must go back to my old life. I pray Heaven death may be kinder than life will be now. You —you will let me kiss you once more?"

"Oh, Leslie, don't break my heart!" I cried wildly, as I sank sobbing upon his breast.

"Poor little love," he murmured tenderly, stroking my hair with the old caressing touch. "Poor little child, who loved me so well. May Heaven for ever bless her. It is my last prayer."

There was a short silence. Dear Heaven, what agony silence can hold!

All my old perfect love for him welled up in my heart at that instant; all the passion

of my woman's nature called out in its tender and despairing force.

For one brief moment he held me in his arms and pressed his kisses on my lips, then he tore himself away, the door opened—closed—and he was gone. Gone for ever. I fell upon my knees; I bowed my head in the silence of my heart's despair. How wild and fierce and uncontrollable was the longing that seized me to call him to my side once more; to see his eyes, to feel his kisses. In vain, in vain.

In the calm radiance of the moonlight, with blinding tears in my eyes, and a passionate despairing cry lingering on my lips, I knelt there alone—so utterly alone!

And in the dusk of the shadows, with the rich and fragrant beauty of the perfect night around me, I prayed for death as some might pray for life.

No one came near me. No one heard either prayers or sobs. I knelt there alone with my great sorrow, a mute, despairing, broken-hearted creature, only hearing a voice for ever silent; only seeing a face for ever gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

I SCARCELY remember what happened after Leslie left me. I know I rose at last and groped my way into the conservatory again in a dazed, helpless manner. There I sat down and waited till my hostess appeared once more, and pleading sudden illness, which my looks amply verified, I sent for my carriage and drove home again.

Home! Ah, what a mockery of the word was that splendid mansion! How desolate it looked for all its grandeur that so many had envied!

I went slowly up to my own room. My

maid was there sitting up for me, and she started as she caught sight of my face. Indeed I was shocked myself, when I saw it in the glass—it looked so ghastly and so changed.

"Are you ill, my lady? Can I do anything for you?" she asked hastily.

I shook my head.

"Take off these things and help me to bed; I am only tired," I said.

Tired—only tired. Ah, that was true enough! Tired of suffering and of life. Worn out, body and mind, at last. I lay down and closed my eyes.

She thought I was asleep. I heard her moving softly about the room, putting away my costly ball-dress, arranging the trifles on my dressing-table. Then she left, and I heard the door gently closed and knew I was alone—alone with this memory of treachery that had betrayed, of love that

had been denied me. I buried my face in the pillows. I could not weep. I could only think, and in thought I seemed to live over again the agony of that hour when I had learned my darling's truth too late.

How basely we had been wronged, how treacherously deceived! And now I had lost him—lost him for ever. I dared not trust myself to meet or see him again. My strength would not bear the ordeal of such another interview as that last had been. No, we had parted for life now. No seas could divide us more utterly than the love that still burned in our hearts, and made a calmer or more conventional ground for future friendship impossible—impossible to him, impossible to me.

Yet what had I to hold me true and faithful to my husband? Nothing but bare duty; nothing but the purer instincts of the soul

that pointed out the sin which was cloaked in so tempting and beautiful a guise as Leslie's words had cloaked it.

All the livelong terrible night I lay thinking such thoughts as these; wakeful and despairing, tortured by an anguish that almost maddened me.

The scene through which I had passed was graven on my mind with fiery distinctness; every word, every look, of my lost love, lived before me again. And with them came the memory of hopes I had buried—of all glad and gracious promises of the joys I had for ever lost.

The long, wakeful, terrible hours passed, every hour finding me wrestling with my misery, praying wild, impious prayers that my life might end; for truly my burden seemed too heavy to bear. But with the morning light a new purpose shaped itself in my brain, and urged me to revenge

myself on the traitress who had wronged me. I longed to confront her, to tear the mask from her smiling face, to show to my father, who was himself the very soul of honour, the falsity of the woman who bore his name.

She had thought nothing of killing all my glad and girlish peace, of wrecking faith and trust, and turning the sweetness of love to the bitterness of gall. No, she had had no remorse, no pity for me. I would show her none now. Let her look to herself when the hour of our meeting came.

And so at last, I arose and clothed myself as society and conventionality—those terrible bugbears—demand. Even with a broken heart a woman cannot neglect the duties of her toilette altogether. But all the time I saw Leslie's white, despairing face, and heard his last words, and felt like one

who was blind and deaf and dead to all things around and about.

Two hours later I was standing in Lady Ramsay's morning-room awaiting her appearance. She entered at last, with a face all smiles, with an air of gushing effusion, and was about to favour me with an affectionate embrace, when I drew coldly back.

"Please shut the door," I said, in a hard, chilling voice that sounded as though it belonged to someone else. "I have something to say to you."

"Indeed?" and she raised her eyebrows superciliously, but obeyed my direction nevertheless. "And what important communication have you to make that demands so tragic an air?"

"You cannot guess, I suppose?"

"Certainly not! Have you had a quarrel

with your husband, or lost some of your diamonds, or——"

"Hush," I said sternly. "I don't often trouble you with my presence, nor, after to-day, will I willingly set foot in your house again."

"Upon my word, this is getting better and better! Are you rehearsing for the stage, Rita, my dear?"

But a faint colour came into her cheek, and her voice was no longer natural, but simply defiant.

"I am going to unmask a piece of diplomacy worthy of any stage," I answered bitterly. "Lady Ramsay's talents are indeed wasted 'on the desert air.' Society is not half aware of her marvellous powers of cheating, intriguing, finessing—of her plenteous arts of invention, of—worthiest gift of all—her skill at forgery, and imitating handwriting!"

She turned deathly pale, and started perceptibly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, in a voice that vainly strove for calmness.

A little, bitter laugh escaped me. I had my enemy in the toils now.

"This is what I mean," I said, drawing forth the letter—the fatal letter that had wrecked my whole life's happiness. "Do you recognise the writing, Lady Ramsay? Do you think my father will prize his wife more dearly than he does, when he sees this proof of her wonderful talents?"

"I — I — don't understand you," she stammered feebly. "To what letter are you alluding?"

"The letter you sent to Captain Macgregor three years ago. I can give you the date, if you wish it. I should be glad to know also what you have done with those I wrote to him, and which

must have been stolen — ah, you don't like the word!—yes, I repeat, *stolen* by someone, for they never reached him."

For a moment dead silence reigned between us, then my antagonist recovered herself, and grew bold once more.

"I suppose you have met that man again, and from all I have seen of your infatuation and indelicacy I am not at all surprised to find you have actually forced him into excusing his bad conduct."

"How dare you speak so!" I cried, losing all self-restraint, goaded to fury now by her vile insinuations. "Do you know what you have done? You have ruined two lives by your treachery. You have given us both such misery to bear as I —goaded and desperate as I am—could yet not give my worst enemy, were it in my power! It is not enough that we find, too late, how cleverly we have

been fooled, but we find, too, that our love, once so pure and sinless, is now a curse, is a thing that tempts us to destroy ourselves, body and soul. Oh, Heaven, are you a woman, and have acted thus?"

Sobs broke my voice, and choked my words. I bowed my face on my hands, and great, burning tears rushed to my eyes. I saw before me how desolate and terrible a thing a loveless life can be, and the sight was too much for me.

"If I said I was sorry, you would not believe me," said the voice of my foe. "But I am sorry, Rita, think what you will; so sorry that had I known——"

"Had you known you would be found out, you would not have done it," I interrupted passionately. "Oh, Lady Ramsay, did you think of what you gave me to bear! I cannot break my vows, wildly as

I love my lover. I cannot free myself while life lasts from the bondage you have forced upon me. I am young and strong, and that makes my sufferings doubly, trebly intense. I have nothing to hope for, to look to. My husband hates me. You know what his life is, and what mine must therefore be; and in my youth and helplessness I am condemned to fight this fearful warfare with duty and with love. I can never reach my darling's arms save through the bitterness of sin or—death. And this, this is your work. Are you not proud of it?"

For all answer she burst into tears. I had never seen her weep, and I gazed at the unexpected outburst in stony amazement.

"Do you feel? *Can* you feel?" I asked her in my wonder and my disbelief. "Then think what it must be to bear it; to go on

all one's life feeling that to look back is maddening, and to look forward is as hope of the lost."

"Don't talk so wildly—don't," she implored. "I give you my word of honour——"

A scornful laugh broke from my lips at that word.

"Honour!" I repeated ironically. "I should have thought, Lady Ramsay, you and that inconvenient virtue parted company long before you could have brought yourself to pen—this." And I pointed to the forged letter which I still held in my hand.

She flushed and bit her lip, as if to repress the anger her face showed.

"I will not argue with you," she said coldly. "Do your worst. I am only sorry to see that a married woman can so far forget herself as to speak openly and un-

blushingly of her love for a man who is not her husband. After showing such a want of principle in one matter, I can no longer wonder that you feel no scruple about publishing facts such as those which have come to your knowledge. You had better proclaim your whole story to the world. Drag the old house you pretend to revere through the mire of public scandal! Do anything that is foolish and impulsive by way, not of healing your own wounds, but of revenging yourself on me, for I know you always hated me!"

I stood perfectly bewildered and dumbfounded at this avalanche of "virtuous indignation." Evidently Lady Ramsay was quite able to take up the cudgels in self-defence, and I felt poor and spiritless in comparison.

"I did not love you—true," I said

slowly; "but I have never wronged you. Why did you do this?"

"Whether you believe me or not," she answered more calmly, "I only did it for the best. I thought your love was some romantic girlish folly that would soon be forgotten, and he is not a good man, or——"

"What is that to you?" I cried fiercely, turning on her as a young lioness might turn on its hunters. "Good or bad, who made you a judge? Were he ever so bad his conduct is white against the blackness of your treachery! Were he ever so bad I shall love him till I die!"

My voice trembled and wavered, and only intense resolve held back another fit of wild, passionate weeping.

"If I had known," she said, with just a ring of pity in her voice that unnerved me at last, "if I had known——"

I stood silent. My heart beat with great suffocating throbs, my eyes grew dim with blinding tears.

"Since ever I saw this," I said, pointing to the fatal letter, "I have had but one thought, the thought of revenge, of holding you up to my father's scorn and contempt, as you once held me up to my lover's. But now, even at the moment I hold my vengeance in my grasp, I tell you this: I will not degrade myself to your level by taking it. Look!"

I took the letter and tore it into fragments before her eyes. Then I turned away and left her, it may be to remorse or —relief. I neither knew nor cared.

Home through the blinding sunshine, home through the gay and brilliant streets, home with my load of shame and sorrow I drove again. I reached my room, and

locked the door. Utterly spent, and wearied with long fasting and excitement, I threw myself down upon the soft cushions of the couch. Something white gleamed on the table beside me. I seized it with some inward presentiment. It was a letter, a letter from Leslie!

For a moment I gazed at the dear familiar writing, every stroke and turn of which I knew so well, with dazed and wondering eyes. Why had he written? Why? Once more his words came back to me. Once more the echo of his passionate pleading sounded in my ears, till I turned faint and dizzy with its power. Was he going to urge it again; now, too, when I was so weak and, Heaven forgive me, so reckless?

I trembled as I held the paper in my hands. Then, with a sudden determination

to know the worst, I tore open the envelope and began to read.

"DARLING,

"I must write—mad, foolish as it seems—even though by doing so I open again the wounds, which ache afresh since I have met you—seen you—but to lose you for ever! Oh, my love, my love, shall I ever forget you as I saw you last with the moonlight on your sweet pale face, and your eyes so eloquent in their love and despairing entreaty? That scene burns in my brain, that and my deathless love for you. How vilely we have been wronged, how basely deceived! And we are helpless to avenge it. I dare not trust myself to meet you again. After what I said to-night, you must own such a task is beyond my strength. I cannot look upon

you without the longing to wrench you from all vile restraints of social laws, and claim you by right of my love and yours. You are not happy, I know it, I saw it, and your unhappiness is the deadliest temptation life has ever thrown in my path. I think of what I would have made you, what I could make you even now, and—but no, I will not write such words. I will curb and restrain myself for your sake, for you are dearer than my own life. If only you had waited, if only this fearful barrier had not been raised between us, we might still have learnt the truth ere it was too late, ere our love had become by your marriage—a sin. But it is vain to torture myself or you with the anguish of what 'might have been.' I write to say farewell. We shall not meet again, for I leave England to-morrow. Perhaps some friendly shot, some peril of the battle-field, which will be my home

henceforth, may give me the only boon I crave—a soldier's death. But of this be sure, my love is yours till the last—till the last!"

This was all; the end of all! I crushed the letter to my bosom as a mother clasps her dead child. My hot tears dropped like scalding rain upon it. He was gone, my brave, noble-hearted love, who was so true, for all my doubts, for all my broken faith.

Should I ever forget him? Should I ever cease to love him? Never till I was dead! I was young, and yet I felt so old, so old that I seemed to have outlived all joy, all hope, now; and only because of that sweet buried summer-time when I learnt how fatally faithful a woman's love can be.

"Let me bury it now," I said to myself. "Let me put these memories into the grave of my dead youth, even as earth buries her

withered leaves, her faded blossoms. Perhaps they too may spring to life again; perhaps they too may have a resurrection day, when the endless summer of the Better Land has bloomed for my love and me!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

Two years had passed; sad years, dreary years enough to me. I lived on my life as best I might. I did my duty as Heaven gives one strength to do it, but since I had read my darling's parting words I was a broken-spirited woman. I was so changed, so utterly changed, that I wondered at myself; I wondered if I could indeed be the same girl of whom these pages speak when I and Glynne went forth for that summer holiday in the dear dead days of old. It might have been a century ago, so far away

it seemed; and I had but one consolation in my life now—Glynne.

From the hour he learnt the treachery that had wrecked my life, my brother's devotion grew gentle and untiring as that of the tenderest woman. He knew what my love had been. He knew what my marriage was, and blaming himself for all the suffering I endured, and yet hid successfully from all eyes save his, he strove to atone for it by everything in his power.

I think, if it had not been for him, I should have gone mad or died with my misery; but I knew that at least I had done good to someone in the world, and that my sacrifice was not utterly wasted, and that thought gave me just one spark of comfort to light the darkness of my way.

Sir Arthur's coldness and neglect grew daily more conspicuous. As my strength

failed and my spirits flagged, and the beauty of health and youth faded from my wan cheeks and languid frame, I could hardly expect to find favour in his eyes.

It was Glynne who first drew attention to my visibly failing health, and insisted upon my seeing a physician. I had wasted away to a mere shadow. My strength seemed utterly broken down. Every movement grew to be an exertion that overpowered me with lassitude and fatigue. Like a bow unstrung my strength gave way at last, and the mandate of science went forth: "Change of scene and a warmer climate without delay."

I was perfectly indifferent. I did not care whether I was ill or well. Life that was stripped of love and sympathy and happiness held few attractions, and my

brother's love was the only thing that now made it endurable. Sir Arthur absolutely refused to go anywhere with me when he heard the physician's opinion. "Doctors were all fools, women were lackadaisical idiots, full of fancies. He wasn't going to lose the hunting season for any of them."

Such were his sentiments, and I received them with perfect indifference. I did not care whether I got well or ill, whether I remained in England or not; but Glynne held a different opinion, and fought my battle bravely.

It ended in my passing the winter at Cannes, and then when spring dawned once more, making the earth bright and beautiful as hope itself, he and I went to Florence together. A few months in Italy, the doctor had said, and I should be as well and strong as ever.

When I saw how glad Glynne was, I could not be heedless any longer. I was still young, and the life within me was hard to kill—harder perhaps because I so little valued or desired it.

I had begun to see beauty in the world once more, to drink in the balmy fragrant air with something of the old enthusiastic gladness, to feast my eyes on the blossoming loveliness of field and orchard, hill and mountain; to gaze with seeing eyes at the bloom of ripening vineyards, the hues of flower and foliage, at the blue sweep of waters, and the gleam of starlit skies; to be no longer blind, and deaf, and senseless; and for this I was almost thankful.

Memory tortured me still; but the sting grew less sharp, for time was soothing my sorrow, as sooner or later it soothes all sorrows, be they never so great and tragic.

One tender, closing evening in spring I stood by my brother's side and gazed, like a dreamer just awakened from a long and painful trance, at the fair city where we were to make our home.

The sun was setting, and woods and waters, spires and palaces were all bathed in a faint translucent golden mist. The meadows were white with lilies; the broad Arno glistened like a mirror of polished silver, the olive woods rested gray and silent against the clear sapphire of the distant sky; soft rosy masses of clouds drifted lazily in the golden sea of the west; the vesper bells rang softly out the call to prayer; and, as I gazed and listened, my eyes grew dim with tears that for once had no sadness. A strange tremor of wonder and of awe thrilled me. The warmth and fragrance and loveliness of earth softened my stubborn heart

and whispered of the fairer wonders of Heaven.

Does it sound fanciful to say this? Ask those who have been spell-bound by a great grief, whose senses have been dulled by pain, their eyes blinded by weary weeping, whether some scene, some word, some sound has not suddenly rent aside the veil of sorrow, and penetrated to the heart's darkness, and brought such a glad blissful sense of entire relief, that, in the revulsion of feeling, they have felt inclined to fall upon their knees and thank Heaven for the power of rejoicing, feeling, perceiving once again.

Whether my words be foolish or fanciful I know not. I do know, however, that there is truth in them. I do know that hope and youth and feeling seemed to revive in my crushed heart once more, beneath the voice and the smiles of nature.

In the villa that was ours, that nestled amidst the Florentine hills like a bird's nest in its bower of leaves, I spent long, dreamy, painless days, the like of which I had never known.

It was the reaction after long suffering, the lull after the storm. Nothing broke it, nothing disturbed it. I had Glynne's love and Glynne's care, and my thoughts went back once more to the childish days that were so glad and innocent, ere the golden morning of my life had set in clouds and darkness, and I awoke from the dreams of a child's heart to the sorrow and despair of a woman's love.

One night I was lying on my couch by the window, waiting for Glynne's return. He had gone to the town for letters and papers, and I, having grown weary of reading, had closed my book and was gazing idly out at the sparkling

stars that lighted the great blue vault of the sky, at the clusters of *lucciole* moving above the clustering leaves and wax-like blossoms of the magnolias in the garden without. It was a night for poets' dreams and lovers' meetings, a night ethereal and radiant as day can never be.

There were heavy odours and fragrant scents, the red gleam of oleanders, the white globes of half-closed magnolia blossoms; a bell chimed faintly from the city; voices sounded softly from the road without. Everywhere was beauty and peace and fragrance. I closed my eyes on it all and felt my heart thrill with its old vain, passionate dreams.

How I longed to be free and young and happy once again; to lay my weary head on the breast of my unforgotten lover, and feel his kisses trembling on my lips. Ah, Heaven, that they might

so rest there—for ever and for ever—into the dreams of the future—into the arms of death!

Glynne had come back. He had packets of papers and letters; but none for me. Very rarely, indeed, did Sir Arthur trouble me with an epistle, and when he did they certainly bore out the truth of the axiom that "Brevity is the soul of wit," for they were brief to the point of nothingness.

I lay back on my pillows, and my brother's pleasant cheery voice sounded ever and anon in the stillness, reading out scraps of news — *on dits* of society, political rumours, home news, and literary and art gossip — whatever he thought might interest me.

Suddenly a hurried frightened ex-

clamation escaped him. I saw him turn deadly pale.

"What is it, dear?" I asked, springing up from the couch as I spoke.

"Nothing—nothing," he answered confusedly, and hastily turning the leaf of the journal as he uttered the denial.

"Glynne," I said, and my voice sounded harsh and sharp, and a deadly fear chilled my heart and numbed my limbs; "tell me—what has happened? Is it anything about—him—about Leslie?"

Then my brother came and knelt beside me, and I heard his voice, all shaken by repressed fear, and vain restraint.

"Oh, Rita — try to bear it! Don't look at me so, for Heaven's sake! He is—dead."

"Dead!"

That was all I said. There arose before

my eyes the brave beautiful face I loved so dearly — the love I had given and received so vainly. With no word, with one faint gasping sob, I sank back upon my couch.

I knew no more.

CHAPTER XXX.

Oh God! that it were possible
For one short hour to see
The souls we loved, that they might tell us
What, and where they be!

So I cried bitterly and passionately for many and many a day after the news of Leslie's death had reached me.

He had died of fever at Bombay, so the papers said in that brief obituary notice, which I gazed at again and again, wondering a little if the person who wrote or the printers who printed it, ever dreamed of the awful meaning it would bear for one reader out of the many whose eyes might rest upon it.

I had no tears to shed. The shock seemed to have stunned me, and all the warmth and life had gone out of my heart once more. So long as he was alive, so long as a faint hope was in me that in some dim, far-off future we might yet meet and speak again, I had almost unconsciously built upon it. Now it was snatched away. The whole wide earth never severed us so utterly as this tiny notice which I held in my hands, and the meaning of which I tried to force into my dull, aching brain.

Was I very wicked? I think I forgot that I was a wife, that love and I had parted over a grave which my tears had watered for long, weary, hopeless years. I forgot all, even Heaven's mercy, for a time, and only prayed for a like release, only lay and longed, till longing maddened me with pain, that I too might follow my darling

to the silent land whither he had gone, that I too might be laid at rest under the cold white marble of some aisle of graves, and know that life was ended and sorrow at rest.

As the weeks went by, and the fragrant hill air swept in through the windows, and the rich and blossoming loveliness of the world without greeted my listless eyes, Glynne began to persuade me to rouse myself once more, to go out with him on some of those impromptu excursions we used to indulge in so often; and for his sake I tried to throw off the lethargy that was creeping over me, the weary languor that seemed to steal strength and health from my feeble frame once more. Happily for my poor boy, he had found some English acquaintances here, and I insisted upon his being with them as often as possible.

I only cared to be alone—alone with

my sad thoughts and sadder memories, undisturbed by alien voices and rough though kindly sympathy for the failing health that made me look so wan and pale and shadowy. If spirits could indeed visit this earth, I am sure Leslie's spirit must have come to me, for I prayed and besought and craved for some sign, some token from my lost love, till my vigils almost killed me.

"Only to know—only to know!" So I would say as I knelt and wrestled with my passionate longings. "Only to know he was happy—blest—at peace; only to know he still loved me, watched over me, saw me."

Ah me, how foolish and how mad I was! The world was fair, so fair, and yet for me the beauty was dim, the music was silent. The same scenes lay before me, only the glory had departed.

Only! Ah, how much that word means!

Only the silence of one voice, the absence of one presence, and the pall of desolation falls over earth and sky, till the hand of Heaven alone can raise it again.

"What an empty, purposeless life mine has been!" I said to myself sometimes. "Oh, if I could only rouse myself; if I could but forget the past, or be of some use, or do some good to anybody!"

Then I made resolutions. I would go home. I would pay that long deferred visit to Sir Arthur's country seat. I would visit the tenants, minister to the poor, nurse the sick. I would do something, anything to rouse myself from this dreadful apathetic indifference to life, and the interests and duties it involved. It seemed when I looked back on my past as if all the love and aspirations I had ever possessed had been poured out on one object, had been recklessly squandered in that one

fierce, engrossing passion, for which I had suffered and sinned so terribly.

Yes, sinned. My marriage surely was a sin in the eyes of Heaven, even though I thought I had so good an excuse for it. And yet, what could I have done? What could I do again, supposing I could re-live the past?

It was too late to alter anything—too late; and yet I was sorry, so sorry now for the lives that had suffered and been shadowed by that one most fatal love. When the summer was dawning in all its beauty, and the city astir with life and light, I bade adieu to Florence. I turned with feeble steps and aching heart back to the land I hated.

If duty be a stern task-master, at least its rewards are sweet. In my morbid sorrow, my selfish grief, I had never known

one hour of peace. Now I had many—hardly-won, earnestly worked for, it is true, but nevertheless bringing some sense of satisfaction with them. Autumn had come with its golden grain, its scents of ripe luscious fruit, its gorgeous beauty of colour, and I was for the first time in my life enacting the part of *châtelaine* at Sir Arthur's seat in Southshire.

There were a few people—chiefly men—staying in the house, but they were away all day, and I had ample leisure to set about the work I had purposed. I made friends with the tenants, and interested myself in all their wants and abuses, of which I found many. Sir Arthur had been a most indifferent landlord, and I was shocked at many an injustice and hardship that came to my notice, borne uncomplainingly, but none the less hard for that.

My great desire now was to keep thought at bay, to prevent myself from dwelling solely on my sorrows, and exaggerating them until they dwarfed all other interests. Morbid grief is a terrible enemy that demands incessant warfare ere it can be vanquished. Memory was too tenacious to be shaken off; nay, I did not wish to part with it entirely, but the sting of remembrance grew less sharp with the healing influence given by a less narrow range of thought and feeling—a determination to enter into the sorrows and necessities of others.

When I saw the sufferings, the toilful lives, the patient, uncomplaining existence led by so many around me, I felt ashamed of my own selfish and absorbed grief. When I thought of my darling now, it was with awed and tender feelings, not the wild frenzy of longing that had once driven me almost desperate. He had left

the troubles and woes of earth behind him. I, alas! had still to fight my way amongst them all.

No human creature can quite judge of another. Our natures are a mystery often to ourselves. I daresay my love-story sounds foolish enough to some ears—a senseless infatuation—a morbid passion that spoilt the best part of my life. But to me it was all and everything, and my sore spirit-stirrings and weary struggles were painfully real things. Heaven gives us bitter physic often and often. I drank mine with shuddering lips and most unthankful heart; but, after all, a day came when I learnt to be thankful for it, when I could say it had worked a cure, and I fully realised the blessings of health and peace again.

Work is the panacea for soul-sickness, and to work I turned with such languid

energy as I could command. There were times often and often when I felt weary and disheartened, when I could have echoed Mrs. Browning's words:

> We are so tired, my heart and I;

but I struggled against the weakness now, instead of yielding to it. I said to myself:

"The 'rest' will come at last."

I had my own plans about the alterations and innovations necessary, not only for the good of the property, but the patient, toilful creatures who dragged on their burdensome lives with never a word of complaint.

Sir Arthur first laughed at my new "whim," as he called it, then grew impatient, and bade me do what I pleased. With the assistance of the steward, I saw my schemes in a fair way of being carried

out. Cottages were repaired, farms drained, the young sent to school instead of running wild about the village, the building of new cottages undertaken, the aged and sick relieved; and the first gleam of happiness and content I had known for many years was when, a year after I had come among them, the whole tenantry assembled and marched up to the Hall, in order to present me with a vote of thanks, too genuine to be accepted as a mere compliment, for all I had done and was doing for them.

Sir Arthur was away in London then, but I had refused to go on the plea of my health. I could not stand the fatigues of a London season I told him, and I knew, too, why I shrank from the memories it would awaken in my heart again. My husband was still what he had ever been—reckless, selfish, dissipated; but I grew less keenly

observant of his faults. I strove to excuse them, and to throw myself with greater zest into the new interests and occupations I had found.

When he came down for the hunting, accompanied by a host of sporting, idle, dissipated men, I kept as much away as possible from their society. It was a time I always dreaded, partly because of the wild orgies and unseemly scenes that invariably followed, partly because Sir Arthur's jests and merriments were invariably at my expense, and he seldom lost an opportunity of holding me up to the ridicule and contempt of his boon companions.

I cared little for this, however, and lived as much as possible in my own rooms, seldom meeting any of the party except at dinner. Sir Arthur sometimes asked why I never invited my stepmother; but I think the

cold and indignant manner with which I greeted his suggestion astonished him too much for its repetition.

I had never seen her since that scene in her boudoir—since I relinquished my vengeance, yielding it to Him who is the best and wisest redresser of all injustice in this world of sin and suffering. My feelings were softer now—the first force of wrath and indignation had spent itself; but still I could not see her under my roof, greet her as a friend, smile on her as before, and know what I did know respecting her treachery. But Sir Arthur did not know all this, and called me a "cold-hearted little fool," and various other flattering appellations. Yet I infinitely preferred them to the bear-like endearments with which I was sometimes favoured.

One morning I stood at the window of my boudoir, looking at the departing

figures of my husband and his red-coated companions. They were off to a "meet" at some distance, and would not be back till late. I should have a whole long day to myself, and I was busy with schemes for its employment.

I visited some of my pet cottagers. I laughed and romped with curly-headed children. I listened meekly to long stories from old women and old men. I left lavish gifts of tea and snuff and bright shillings behind me. Then I went home and wandered through the warm luxurious rooms, the dim scented aisles of beautiful conservatories. I gazed at all the splendour and magnificence around me, and I told myself I had much for which to be thankful still. I wondered, too, if I should grow old and wrinkled and feeble, and wander about here on crutches, or sit nodding over the fire employed on

endless yards of knitting as I saw all my old women doing.

It seemed strange to think of it—strange because I was so full of vitality, life, youth. Yes, despite my sufferings and sorrows, despite my griefs and tears, I was not aged or worn—only a little paler and sadder than of yore. My three-and-twenty years sat lightly on my shoulders. My forehead had no wrinkles; my hair no silver threads amidst its dusky luxuriance; my eyes were still bright and soft, despite the many, many tears I had shed. Yes, grief does not always kill. Was I not a proof of it as I stood there amidst the fragrant blossoms — a little fragile figure, robed in dusky velvet, with eyes dreamy and shadowed by pain, but yet able to smile and look out upon other things save grief?

As I stood thus idly toying with my

scarlet roses and looking dreamily at the distant reflection of my own figure, which had brought up these thoughts, I heard a step crossing the rooms without. Hurriedly I turned, wondering who it could be. It was too early surely for any of the huntsmen to have returned.

"Glynne!" I cried, startled at the unexpected sight of my brother's face as he came forward in the gloom. "My dear boy, whatever brings you here at this time? Have you come to stay? Are they all well at home?"

He came forward and took me tenderly in his arms and kissed me gravely many times. Something in his silence appalled me. Was he the bearer of bad news again?

"Glynne," I said, "has anything happened?"

"Poor child!" he answered compassion-

ately. "It seems as if I were always to be the bearer of bad news to you, Rita. Where is Sir Arthur? I must see him at once!"

"He is at the 'meet' at Fernly Woods," I said, wondering why he wished to see my husband. "He can't be back till late—not for two hours yet. But do tell me what is the matter, Glynne. Is—is"—and my voice falters as I put the question—"is anyone dead?"

"Dead—no!" he said abruptly. "But, Rita—do you know—has Sir Arthur told you anything about his money matters lately? How he stands or——"

"Or what?" I questioned, more and more bewildered by his grave and evident anxiety.

"Or what investments and speculations he has dabbled in?"

"No!" I exclaimed in wonder. "He

never tells me anything about his money. It is true he has grumbled lately, whenever I have asked him for any, but still he has always given it. Do you mean to say, Glynne, he has lost any?"

"*Any?*" said my brother fiercely, as he paced up and down the marble floor, brushing my poor blossoms rudely from their stems by his rapid movements. "All is more likely! Oh, Rita, I believe the fool is ruined! But it is for you I tremble, darling, for all you will have to bear, for all you will lose! And this is the marriage I have forced upon you! Heaven forgive me! What a fool I have been!"

I turned very pale at his words, but they did not trouble me very much. To be poor again—well, what of it? My riches had never brought me very much happiness. I had done a little good, perhaps, of late, but after all——

My brother's voice broke in upon my thoughts here.

"If he has made any provision for you, it's all right. Do you recollect anything about your marriage settlements?"

"No; papa does, though;" and then I laughed and said, "Why, Glynne, he can't be ruined; it's impossible. Sir Arthur had such heaps and heaps of money. Only twelve months ago there was his mother's sixty thousand pounds. What has become of it all?"

"You had better ask him," said my brother gloomily. "I hope he may tell you. Gambling, betting, and horse-racing, not to mention sundry other little amiable weaknesses on your husband's part, have made fine havoc with his income. Then he sells out his whole capital like a fool, and invests it in one of the maddest enterprises of which one ever heard. The thing's

smashed up, of course, and goodness only knows what he will do now!"

I stood silent, and my thoughts drifted idly, aimlessly about. I should have to lay aside my purples; I could play at greatness no longer; but the thought gave me no pain, scarce even a regret.

The sights and scenes, the luxuries, frivolities, and splendour of my late life seemed to drop off from me as a mantle. My hand touched the soft rich velvet of my sweeping robe, and I half smiled to think I must no longer wear costly garments and priceless jewels, and all the foolish glittering insignia of wealth and importance.

I heard Glynne consoling and explaining, but I did not heed him. I knew that time passed, that servants flitted to and fro with noiseless steps, that lights shone in the rooms, that my maid came to know whether

I would not dress for dinner; but all the time my ears were strained to catch the sound of returning horses, to hear the loud, ringing voice and noisy greeting of my husband.

My husband! I called him that now with a pity and remorse I had never known before. I waited to break the sad news with gentle sympathy, to tell him that the world was not everything, that we might still live in comfort, if not in luxury, in peace if not in splendour; and as I watched and waited with straining ears and beating heart, there came the slow, solemn tramp of many feet, the sound of hushed and awe-struck voices, and over the threshold of the house that he quitted in fullest strength and vigour only a few short hours ago, they bore a crushed and bleeding form.

There was no need to break the news of

fallen fortune, there was no need for words of pity and late-born sympathy to greet the ruined master of this stately hall.

He had gone where riches and poverty are alike unknown, where "neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal."

CHAPTER XXXI.

Oh, that t'were possible,
After long grief and pain,
To feel the arms of my true love
Round me once again!

In the hushed stillness of a summer night I stood in the garden on the Florentine hills where once before I had stood with tired, reluctant feet, longing to lay down the burden of life that seemed too great to bear. I had borne it two years since then, and I was thankful that my wild prayer had not been listened to.

The sun had gone down, and the shadows of night had fallen. The olive woods

gleamed white as silver beneath the radiant moonlight. The hills were sleeping in shadow, the roses burnt in the shelter of glistening leaves, the vines were bright as day. To me the beauty had never seemed so fair, the peace never so peaceful, for a great calm had come upon my heart, and my life was at rest at last.

I was no longer rich. Jewels, horses, carriages, costly apparelling—all were gone in the wreck of my husband's fortunes; but I had enough—enough to content me. What more did I need now?

I had come to Florence because I loved it so; because its beauty and its teaching once saved me in my deepest misery. I had a tiny villa on the hills. I had books, music, flowers—all things I loved and cared for in art and nature, and I was quietly, peacefully happy. My old serving-man and his wife shook their heads at times, and

told me this lonely life was bad for me. I smiled. They did not know what an unutterable blessing is the rest that comes after some great stormy trial. Happy people! I did not rebuke their well-meant suggestions; I only smiled at them, and lived on in my own way content.

I stood on the hill-side and gazed down at the massed lights of the city. The sound of bells and music and voices floated upwards on the still evening air. Such a night as this it was when I received the news of my darling's death, when the last chord of hope snapped in my heart, and I saw only the blackness of a desolate future before me. My eyes held no tears now; my weary soul had found peace at last.

Slowly I wandered up and down the garden paths. Under my feet were dropped blossoms and wild grasses; above me was a maze of roses; everywhere was

the same sweet scent of lilies and magnolias in their rich ripe fragrance.

I had given my household a holiday in honour of some saint's festival, and I was quite alone. Therefore when the sharp click of the garden gate sounded in my ears I started, and gazed in some wonder at the intruder. A tall figure—the figure of a man—came up the garden path. My head swam, my brain reeled as I gazed. Could the grave have given up its dead, or who was—this?

Dumb and trembling I stood, gazing now as I had stood gazing once before. The moon shone upon a pale eager face, upon a head whose shape and form I knew so well—so well; upon eyes love-laden, passionate, welcoming, as only my darling's eyes had ever looked to me.

Nearer, nearer he came. It was a spirit, I told myself—*his* spirit; for was not

Leslie dead? He was there before me, and I could only look and look, but my heart throbbed and my tongue was powerless, and a great dread and a terrible joy held me dumb and spell-bound. Then he spoke.

"Rita—my love. Have you forgotten me?"

Forgotten him! Dear Heaven, what miracle was this? It was Leslie—Leslie himself. Then, with one great cry, all terror and wonder being merged into the wild delirious joy of that moment, I was folded to my darling's heart once more.

"And you did not die," I said foolishly an hour afterwards, when his tale and mine had been told.

"Not exactly, love, seeing I am still here," he answered tenderly. "It was a mistake of the printer's. Colonel Mac-

namara should have been substituted for Macgregor. It was contradicted; but I suppose the mischief had been done by that time."

"And how did you find me out?" I asked.

He looked down at my face with a smile that was bright as sunlight.

"From Glynne, of course! He, too, took me for a ghost at first, and I would not let him prepare you. I wanted to see you myself first."

"And joy never kills," I said softly, looking up at the face above me with happy, tearful eyes.

"Was it such joy?" he whispered tenderly; and my answer was murmured on his breast.

"And I am so poor!" I told him the next day, when amidst the golden sunshine

we strayed hand in hand, laying happy plans for the future that looked so unutterably fair to us now.

"I am glad of it. I hate to think that one piece of that other man's gold is in your possession; and money is not everything, my queen."

"You said it was—once," I returned mischievously.

"Heaven forgive me for the heresy," he said very softly and earnestly. "Now, I would only believe in it as a minister for good to the poor and suffering and afflicted. For us, sweetheart, 'Love is enough.'"

Aye, love is enough—a love that neither grief, nor time, nor death itself can chill or appal, or dissever!

DOT.

DOT.

"It's only Dot singing," said a tall pale girl, looking up at the wondering face of her companion.

"And may I ask who Dot is?" inquired a pleasant manly voice.

The girl shrugged her shapely shoulders with a gesture of contempt.

"Dot! Oh, the hoyden and scapegrace of the family; the torment and despair of us all, from *paterfamilias* downwards; the plague of the governesses; the pet of the servants; the—in short, she is just Dot.

What that conveys you will know when you see her."

"Your description increases my anxiety to make her acquaintance," observed Hereford Wynne. "I had no idea there were any more of you," he added presently.

"Yes; as the child insisted in that immortal poem of Wordsworth's, 'we are seven,'" smiled the girl, thinking ruefully of her two-and-twenty years—suitorless as yet—and all the cares and responsibilities of an impecunious household resting on her shoulders from day to day.

"And when I last saw your father there were only two of you," resumed her companion. "Dear, dear, what changes Time works!"

"Yes," said the girl mechanically. She was thinking of the vexed question of dinner, and marvelling what this stranger

would think of their scanty fare, and how long he intended to stop at Greenhill. It was a queer, old-fashioned, rambling place, situated in a flat, level country, and with no ostensible reason for its name, which had caused much speculation among the young Tresillians, until Dot hit upon a happy solution of the puzzle one Sunday morning. "Of course, it was suggested by that hymn we sang," she said triumphantly.

"How do you make that out?" asked a chorus of incredulous young voices.

"How? It's as plain as—well, as I am —for want of better comparison!" laughed merry Dot. "Doesn't it say, 'There is a *green hill* far away?' It is because the green hills are so far away that the owner, or builder, or whoever he was, of this delectable dwelling-house, christened it as he did."

The discussion ended after that, no one

being able or hardy enough to do battle with Dot's reasoning.

Miss Tresillian was doing the honours of the place to her father's guest this morning —doing them sorely against her will, too; but then someone must do them, she knew, and, after all, she was the most presentable member of the family. Her father had retreated to his study immediately after breakfast, and deputed his eldest daughter to entertain his guest till luncheon-time, but Marjory Tresillian (usually known in her family circle as "Mog") did not exactly relish her task. This grave, stern-faced man, almost as old as her own father, was not a companion suited to her mind—especially when that mind was perplexed with troubled calculations as to whether mutton or beef would be best for dinner, and if cook could be trusted to make some decent soup for once.

Meanwhile, her companion was taking note of the neglected grounds, the untidy walks, the unmown lawn, and drawing his own conclusions therefrom. It was an April day, sweet with scented snow of hawthorn and frail lilies, that peeped timidly out from the shelter of their folded leaves. The sky was flooded with golden sunshine, and blue as the hearts of the violets that nestled in the dim green woods. A faint breeze ruffled the trees, and showed a shimmer of green from the young and budding leaves. Hereford Wynne drew a long deep breath, and taking off his hat, stood bare-headed there in the sweet spring sunshine. "Ah, it is good to be in an English home once more!" he said abruptly.

Pale graceful Marjory started; his words recalled her to a sense of her own remissness in the matter of entertaining their guest. "Yes, it must be; you have been

so long away, have you not?" she said, colouring faintly.

"Twelve years," he said, and a shadow crossed his face.

"But then you have done so much good to the world, to science—so papa says. Your travels have been more to benefit others than yourself."

"I fear I have done little that is of use or benefit to the world at large," he answered almost contemptuously. "My travels certainly have had scientific research for their chief object, but one does not always obtain what one desires, you know. Nature is a great mystery, and the more we study her the more we may. She is a Will-o'-the-Wisp, whose light often lands us in strange places. Beside her the greatest knowledge becomes at times as a child's ignorance. The loftiest intelligence cannot boast the complete understanding

of her secrets any more than the simplest; and our highest discoveries are too often gropings towards light, not light itself."

Marjory looked uncomfortable. This was the sort of way her father talked, and to her it seemed very uninteresting. Perhaps he noticed it, for with ready tact he changed the conversation, bringing it once more into home channels. In these familiar waters the barque of conversation sailed along smoothly enough, and he had learned a good deal about the life, views, and bringing up of the youthful members of his friend's family ere they reached the boundary of their walk, the kitchen-garden.

Marjory hesitated about bringing him in there, but he smiled up in her doubtful face—that frank, pleasant smile which was so hard to resist, which seemed to take the gravity and care of mature age from

brow and lips, and find its way straight to the heart at once.

"I should like to go in, if I may," he said gently.

"It is very untidy, and the children are sure to be romping there," hesitated Miss Tresillian.

"Are they? Well, I should like to make acquaintance with them."

"Oh, certainly—if you wish it," and, with a deepening flush on her usually pale face, the girl led the way in.

Untidy it might be, but it had a charm of its own—that quaintly laid-out old garden, with its tall fruit-trees, its beds of herbs and vegetables, its walks fringed with bushes, giving ample promise of future crops of gooseberries and currants. There was a faint scent of rosemary and balm, and the fresh odour of newly turned

earth, and spring flowers blossoming from out of cunning little nooks of which they had taken possession, and the sound of gay young voices, clear and ringing as only youth and careless hearts could make them, and, above and before all, one sight that Hereford Wynne took in with sudden wistful eyes—a sight that, taken off then and there by Memory's magic power of photography, would never fade or die out from his heart in all the years to come.

It was not such a wonderful sight, after all. Only a girl—a child almost, so sprite-like and fairy-like was her stature —a girl standing on a swing, bare-headed in the flood of living sunlight that poured itself in loving radiance over face and form —a girl with a tangled mass of ruddy chestnut curls, and a face so young, so winsome, so full of light, and laughter,

and kittenish mischief, and girlish fun, that it could only be summed up in one word, "bewitching." Have we not all seen such a face at some moment or other? Do we not know all the charm that is so far beyond mere cold perfection of features and colouring—the charm of mobile lips, and sunny eyes, and a certain sparkling, bewildering loveliness whose chief beauty is change and expression?

Such was Dot—Dot swinging high up in mid-air—with flying skirts that showed her tiny feet, with a tangled mass of rough, bright curls, with eyes soft, dark, laughing —changeful as her nature, mutinous as her will, though never anything but lovely and lovable to the man who met their startled glance for the first time now.

She looked at him but an instant as she flashed into the sunny air beneath the pale

green leaves that shimmered and trembled all about her. Then, swift as thought, she sprang from the swing, and without a word or look to the intruder on her domains, she dashed past him and her sister, over the walks, across the beds, and so out of sight.

Marjory Tresillian turned apologetically to her companion: "It is only Dot," she said.

A faint smile hovered round the grave lips of her father's friend. "So that is Dot?" he said. "She looks like a fairy. I am afraid I startled her. What made her run off in that fashion?"

"It is hard to say," answered the elder sister contemptuously; "she is so odd, no one can do anything with her. She has no more idea of manners than a ploughboy."

"A child of nature," smiled Hereford

Wynne. "She is very pretty; how old is she?"

"Pretty!" ejaculated Miss Tresillian, in unfeigned wonder. "Dot pretty! why, you are the first person I have ever heard say such a thing."

"Am I?" he said carelessly. "There is no accounting for tastes, you see; but who are these youngsters? I did not see any of them last night."

"This is Alice," said Marjory, indicating a slim, fair-haired girl, with eyes and features the exact counterpart of her own. "These are the twins, aged seven; their names are Maud and Gerald; and this," smiling fondly down at a little, brown-eyed boy, with Dot's irregular features, and Dot's crisp, chestnut curls—"this is our youngest—Pelham—usually known as the Poppet. We have all nicknames, Mr. Wynne, and

never by any chance address each other by our real appellations. For instance, I am Mog; Alice is Ally; Gerald becomes Jinks; and Maud, Magpie. Dot was originally Dora, but no one ever thinks of calling her that now. Now I think you know us all. My elder brother's acquaintance you made last night. He is Jack; you see his nomenclature has not suffered so severely as ours. Well, Poppet, what is it?"

The little fellow had come close to her, and was pulling her dress to attract her attention. "Where's Dot gone?" he asked in his pretty, childish voice. "Why did you bring that man here to frighten her away?'

Miss Tresillian coloured. "Hush!" she said, "it is rude to talk like that. Dot will come back presently. Now run and play."

"I want Dot," said the four-year-old tyrant, emphatically. "You go away, and the man, and then she'll come back."

"Very well, I will go away," said Mr. Wynne, laughing, "and when Dot comes back, tell her I am very sorry I frightened her, will you?"

"You did not frighten her," repeated the Poppet, emphatically, as he looked up with bright, defiant eyes into the stranger's face. "Dot is never frightened. I daresay she is angry with you, though."

"Dear me! that is still more terrible!" answered Mr. Wynne, gravely. "Dot's anger! how shall I be able to bear it? What do you do when she is angry with you?"

"I kiss her," returned the Poppet, with equal gravity.

"Lucky Poppet! but I suppose I could

scarcely do that, could I? You see, I am rather older than you."

"Yes, you are quite an old man," returned the little fellow, gravely; "Dot told me so. She peeped through the study window last night, when you were with papa, and saw you there, and told us just what you were like."

"Oh, please, Mr. Wynne, don't pay any attention to these children," pleaded Marjory, scarlet and confused at these ingenuous confessions. "Let us go for our walk now. I promised to show you the old Abbey; it is our one spot of interest in the neighbourhood. Will you come?"

Mr. Wynne laid his hand lightly on the pretty little brown head, and looked down at the flushed, sunburnt face, the clear, deep eyes of the child. "Good-bye, little man," he said, kindly. "Tell Dot I won't

intrude on her domains again, and make friends for me." He stooped and touched the child's brow gently with his lips, and then turned away with a faint sigh to Miss Tresillian. "How old these children make one feel!" he said regretfully.

"Oh, Mr. Wynne, I hope you won't think of what he said!" exclaimed Marjory, in some confusion; "he is only a baby, and Dot spoils him so. They are inseparable, those two, and she is making him as bad as herself."

"I don't think there can be anything 'bad' about your sister," said Mr. Wynne, gravely. "She looks the very incarnation of innocent, joyous youth."

"Oh, you don't know her yet," said Marjory.

"No," and a warm, bright smile flashed all over the man's bronzed face. "I wish I did."

Marjory looked at him with as much astonishment in her calm blue eyes as if he had suddenly betrayed symptoms of insanity.

"I expect you will have a nice time of it when you do. Dot's great idea of making friends with people is to play practical jokes on them at all times and seasons."

"Is it?" said Mr. Wynne, absently. He was thinking of the fairy figure in the swing —of the bright, flashing, mutinous eyes. It seemed to him that nothing Dot could do would be very terrible, even if it took the form of practical jokes.

"Oh, if you please, miss," said a voice behind Miss Tresillian at this moment, "Cook wants to know if she could speak to you a moment."

"Pray do not mind me," entreated Mr.

Wynne, hastily, as he saw how troubled and perplexed his young hostess looked. "I will stroll about by myself. I ought to have remembered your household duties would require you, and not have monopolised you so long."

"I could be back in half-an-hour," said Marjory, doubtfully, her mind vacillating between the necessity of culinary duties and politeness to a guest.

"Do not hurry, I beg," he said with quiet courtesy. "I am not afraid to wander about by myself. I shall not mind it in the least."

"Oh, thank you, then, if you are quite sure."

And Marjory speeded away in the wake of the messenger with an intense feeling of relief in her mind.

* * * *

The woods were full of the stir and frolic of spring. Leaves were fluttering; birds were trilling wild bursts of song; cowslips peeped forth timidly from little nooks; a patch of violets, blue as heaven's own tint, coloured the dusky ground at intervals; a faint hum of insect-life murmured through the swaying grasses, and fluttered about the new-born flowers. All Nature sang the same sweet chant of Hope, the glorious promise of future treasures from her rich and varied stores.

Hereford Wynne wandered on, his gray eyes sombre and heavy, a shadow on the brave, calm face. "Am I really so old?" he thought to himself, and sighed as he thought it. The years had drifted by so quickly, there had been so much to do, to strive for and attain, the illusions of youth had vanished so utterly in the world's hard

school; and now there were gray hairs among his rich, dark locks, and lines of care and thought on his brow, and a child's voice had smitten him to the heart with its frank confession, "You are quite old."

So Dot thought him old also? Again he sighed. Life had been for him a very barren, joyless thing. No sweet ties, no home, no love had it contained; and now the years had crept on apace, the craving for knowledge had been satisfied; the world accounted him great and learned, and would have done him honour wherever he moved in its midst; and with the ripeness of wisdom and maturity he opened his eyes on a new life, simpler, sweeter, holier than what he had known, for a child's hand to wound him to the quick.

He had been athirst for knowledge once; he would have given it all back now for the

blessed exchange of youth, with its innocence, and carelessness, and hopes.

As his thoughts arrived at this unwise conclusion, he suddenly raised his eyes and looked up. In a little opening of the wood stood the fairy figure he had scared away from her haunt a short time before.

Her back was towards him ; she held something in her hand, and was bending over it with so absorbed and intent a care that she was quite unconscious of his near approach. He stopped abruptly ; then, after a moment's hesitation, moved softly over the mossy path until he stood just behind her. Looking over her shoulder with ready ease, he saw that she held in her hands a little dead bird. Her soft fingers were stroking the ruffled feathers, her face was grave and pale, and glittering on the long eyelashes that swept her cheeks was a tear.

Hereford Wynne looked at her in silence, marvelling at the transformation in the girl, the gravity and thoughtfulness of the mischievous, *riante* face. Then, very gently, he laid his hand on her arm. "Why are you crying, Dot?" he said.

The girl flashed round on him, startled and indignant.

"How dare you? Oh, I beg your pardon, I did not know it was you."

"You rushed off in such a very unceremonious fashion when I saw you in the garden, that I hardly supposed you would know it was—I," he said smiling.

"You had no business to come there," said Dot defiantly. "It is our garden exclusively. We don't ever let strangers and visitors in."

"But I was taken in by your sister," he argued. "I heard you singing, though, in

the first instant, and felt a great desire to make your acquaintance."

"Mog ought to have known better," answered Dot, still keeping to the vexed point of discussion. "But then she never thinks of anything but just housekeeping."

"Mog! What a dreadful name!" said Hereford Wynne, thinking how ill it became the fair and sedate Miss Tresillian.

Dot looked at him with no small contempt. "It has nothing to do with you, you are not required to call her it," she said coolly. "And we don't think it dreadful, we like it."

"Yes, I remember your sister telling me that you all favoured nicknames," he answered, taking in all the charm of the pretty, wilful face, that was never the same for two minutes together, wondering in his

own mind how old she was, or how—young. Marjory had not informed him on that point.

"How did you come here?" asked Dot suddenly, as she raised her head and looked fully and frankly at him. She still held the dead bird in her hand, but there were no tears on her eyelashes now.

"I walked."

"Oh, of course, I know that," said Dot impatiently. "We don't keep carriages at Greenhill. I mean, I left you in the garden with—Mog" (looking mischievously up as she uttered the name). "How did you find your way to the woods?"

"Well—I just found it," he answered, laughing. "I followed the road until I came to an opening and saw this path. I took it, and it brought me to you. I hope I did not frighten you much."

"Frighten me!" and Dot laughed—such

a pretty, silvery, heart-whole laugh, that Hereford Wynne thought it the sweetest music to which he had ever listened. "The idea of you frightening me! I am not so silly as all that."

"What were you thinking of when I came up?" he asked, curiously.

Her colour wavered, her dark eyes drooped and fell on the little stone-cold heap of feathers in her hand.

"I was so sorry for it," she said, sighing. "It seemed hard to be dead and the spring just come, and the sunshine and flowers all around, and then the other birds singing so gaily, just as it might have done an hour ago. It was not quite cold when I found it, but it was dead then."

He gazed at her face, wondering at its changed expression. She looked as sorry for the bird as if she sympathised with

its bright, sweet life, its home in the green leaves, its boughs to swing on in the summer sunlight, its songs of praise for ever silenced, its joy in living, its sudden end when the brightness of spring had flushed the earth and made the winter a dream of the past. He saw she felt something of this in her childish soul, and was silent too, watching her.

Suddenly she looked up. "I am going to bury it," she said. "Will you come?"

"Most certainly," he said, and with as much gravity in his face and voice as if the ballad of Cock Robin was not running in his mind. She scrutinised him closely, but no smallest symptom of levity could she detect.

"I daresay you think me silly," she said; "but if so, you needn't come."

"I assure you I think nothing of the kind," he declared earnestly.

"Then if you'll promise not to tell Mog or Jack, I'll show you my burial-ground," she said. "The others know, but Mog would only sneer and ridicule me, so I have never told her. I don't think you will do *that*."

"You are quite right to think it," he said, moving along by her side, while the chequered shadows fell across her face and turned her hair to dark rich gold. "I feel honoured by your trust, I assure you."

"Are you going to stay here long?" asked candid Dot, presently. Silence was not Dot's *forte*.

"A week or two. Your father and I are old friends, you know."

"How funny it must be to know a

person all those years," remarked Dot. "Do you know, I have really nothing to look back upon in the way of friendships —and things."

"I should be surprised if you had," said her companion dryly.

"Oh, but I am not nearly so young as I look," exclaimed Dot eagerly. "I daresay you think I am about fourteen — most people do, because I'm so little — but I'm sixteen. That's quite old enough to have memories, isn't it? Why, mamma was only sixteen when she married. She often told us that."

"Yes, I know. I remember your mother very well."

"Used you to come here when I was young? I don't recollect you."

"No, I daresay not," he said laughing.

"You were not in existence then; only Marjory and Jack."

"And haven't you been in England since?" asked Dot, turning her wide-opened eyes on his face.

"Oh, yes; but I was never able to get to Greenhill. Your father and I have always corresponded, though."

"Nasty dry letters, I suppose," said Miss Dot, contemptuously. "All about beetles, and animals, and bits of rock, and the way the stars go, and that sort of thing."

He laughed outright. "No—not quite so bad as that, Miss Dot. We did have something to say about personal feelings and human nature, too."

"Human nature in the abstract, as a matter of science. Oh, I know!" pouted Dot.

My great desire now was to keep th
at bay, to prevent myself from dw
solely on my sorrows, and exagger
them until they dwarfed all other inte
Morbid grief is a terrible enemy tha
mands incessant warfare ere it can be
quished. Memory was too tenacious t
shaken off; nay, I did not wish to part
it entirely, but the sting of remembr
grew less sharp with the healing influ
given by a less narrow range of thou
and feeling—a determination to enter
the sorrows and necessities of others.

When I saw the sufferings, the to
lives, the patient, uncomplaining existe
led by so many around me, I felt asha
of my own selfish and absorbed gr
When I thought of my darling now,
was with awed and tender feelings,
the wild frenzy of longing that had
driven me almost desperate. He had

of the family.' There's a character for you!"

"That last adjective sounds very alarming," laughed Mr. Wynne. "Have you any idea what it means?"

"I dare say nurse could tell you," answered Dot, demurely. "She used it pretty often."

"Was she not able to manage you?" inquired her companion.

Dot flashed a look at him from her brown eyes—mutinous, wicked, irresistible. "No one has been able to do that yet," she said. "I don't intend they shall."

Was it a challenge in the brown eyes that flashed such cool defiance to the gray, steadfast orbs that met their provocative glance? Almost it seemed so to Hereford Wynne. He looked steadily at the girl's bright face, and noted the

power of the low, broad brow, the sweetness and decision of the pretty, pouting lips. "You will find your master some day," he thought, "fearless as you are;" but he did not utter the thought aloud, and the mutinous eyes drooped suddenly before his gaze, and a curve of sweeping lashes touched those warm, soft, crimson cheeks. "Why, I thought he was *old!*" Dot was musing to herself with a wonder that was almost ludicrous.

"This is the place, Mr. Wynne."

The clear, young voice breaking suddenly on the long silence—a silence filled with many thoughts to both—startled Hereford Wynne. He looked up and saw Dot standing in a tiny glade — an opening in the very heart of the woods.

There was a carpet of soft green moss,

and a square spot of ground railed in with twigs and fastened with wild creepers; the surface of this square was not even, but a number of tiny hillocks, most of them covered with flowers or smooth turf, rose in irregular lines and traversed it from right to left. "This one goes here," said Dot, pointing wistfully to the ground. "Just wait, please, Mr. Wynne — will you? I shall be back in a minute."

She flew off, leaving Hereford Wynne uncertain whether to laugh at her childishness, or honour the deeper feeling of pure sympathy and pity that made her heart so tender to animal life, and gave her such passionate delight in nature. Ere he could arrive at any decision, she was back with a small spade in one hand and a square, wooden box in the other.

"Now you mustn't do anything," she said, magnanimously; "just sit down there—those roots make a good seat. I shan't be long."

"But pray let me do that for you?" said her companion, earnestly, as he saw her prepare to use her spade with an energy that showed her well accustomed to such exercise.

"You? Certainly not!" she returned, scornfully. "You know nothing about it. Now, please do what I told you, and don't bother me. You will only make me longer."

Half indignant, half amused, Hereford Wynne obeyed. He seated himself on the great twisted roots of the tree she had pointed out to him and watched her labours silently. She was very expeditious. The little grave was dug, the bird laid in

it, and the turf placed neatly over the tiny mound in less than twenty minutes. Her task accomplished, she turned to him.

END OF VOL. II.

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